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## **Enacting personalisation**

### **A qualitative study of pupils' and teachers' experiences of personalised learning**

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**Enacting personalisation; a qualitative study of  
pupils' and teachers' experiences of personalised  
learning**

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## **Abstract**

Personalised learning is currently considered by policy makers, parents and, in some cases, by teachers themselves, as an effective approach to ensure successful progress for all pupils.

In this thesis, the concept of personalised learning is explored through listening to the voices of learners and teachers as they share their experiences of schooling that at least in part purports to be shaped around the individual pupil. The impact on pedagogy, pupil-teacher interactions and the self-images of learners is explored, as is the tension between teachers' and 'official' knowledge.

The thesis draws on semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers and 20 pupils in one case-study secondary school, supplemented by observational field-notes. The analysis of the data shows that whilst the teachers are generally supportive of personalised learning, they express a number of concerns, such as the potential for pupils' self-esteem and self-efficacy to be adversely affected when tasks and intervention strategies are adjusted in response to the perceived needs of individual learners. Pupils describe how receiving easier worksheets or being asked more straightforward questions in class might cause them to be seen as less capable, therefore less successful. Although there are only limited opportunities for pupils to personalise their own learning in English secondary schools, there was, nonetheless, evidence from the interviewed pupils that they were prepared to take responsibility for their studies through exercising both agency and autonomy.

It is hoped that this study will further our understanding of how personalised learning comes to be enacted in a school climate characterised by high levels of performativity and accountability. One of the key questions arising from the thesis is the extent to which education should be divided up and shaped around the perceived needs of individuals. In conclusion, it is argued that, if we judge this 'tailoring' to be desirable, then we need a better

understanding of how to apportion the knowledge, skills, support and educational resources amongst all our young people so that personalised learning has, at its centre, the person.

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## **Introduction**

Personalised learning is a concept originating from an initiative in the early 2000s, aimed at giving UK citizens more control over and more say in the delivery of a range of public services, including education. Personalisation is closely aligned to individualisation, a sociological concept, which positions people as solo actors with many decisions to make as how best to proceed in a modern life, one which has significantly less structure and pre-existing obligations than in previous times. However, whilst individualisation emphasizes self-definition and self-actualisation, the effects of other government policies, in particular those that serve to promote high levels of performativity and accountability can mean that, in the case of personalised learning, the associated choice and decision-making by the pupil her or himself is limited. Schools may struggle to implement personalised learning given that their priorities could lie in other aspects of their work, in particular, the activities that will be measured by powerful others, e.g. OFSTED, for example trying to ensure that every pupil meets externally set GCSE targets. Each year, the government publishes pupil performance floor standards for schools to meet and uses large amounts of mainly de-contextualised data on which to judge the quality of provision.

This qualitative case study explores personalised learning through listening to the voices of pupils and teachers in a secondary school. In doing so the intention is to illuminate how personalised learning comes to be enacted in a school climate characterised by high levels of performativity and accountability. In Chapter 1, I examine the history and context of personalised learning. I then look at the influences of OFSTED and government policies on the work of schools and begin to explore some of the characteristics of a system marbled with processes that measure and compare at multiple levels. The final part of this chapter explores the sociological concept of individualisation and, by looking at current societal trends towards personalised goods and services, illustrates how education is not on its own in terms of a move from the collective to the singular.

After describing my methodology in Chapter 2, I use Chapter 3 to explore how one of the key drivers of personalised learning, i.e. the establishment of pupils' needs, becomes a contested area; different actors purport to 'know what's best'. Without consensus on how pupils' needs should be identified and then met, there is serious risk of a mismatch between need and provision. The voices of the research participant teachers are heard, expressing their ideas and concerns about how they try to meet the needs of their pupils. It could be argued that the personalisation of learning is particularly important in order to help pupils with Special Educational Needs to succeed and a focus on this aspect of schools' work then follows, where the views of the Kite Hill pupils are also heard.

I then explore two strands of personalised learning: differentiation in Chapters 4 and 5 followed by intervention in Chapter 6. Chapter 4 builds on the concept of pupil need and explores the pedagogical technique of differentiation whereby the teacher gives tasks at different levels to individuals and groups of pupils according to their perceived needs. A look into how this practice of differentiation can segue into the 'dosing' of skills and knowledge then follows. Differences between classroom approaches in England and France are noted and the impact of differentiated worksheets and questioning on the self-esteem of pupils is explored.

In Chapter 5, I look at the way in which pupils begin to construct their images according to how they perceive themselves to be positioned in terms of school processes, such as the setting of predictive GCSE targets. I also look at how their levels of anxiety and stress would appear to be rising.

As schools respond to the increasing pressures of performativity, more pupils are finding that they are expected to attend additional tuition sessions, often as a means to help them secure their externally predicted GCSE target grades or to assist the school in meeting government floor standards. This aspect of personalisation – the offering of individualised 'packages' of intervention - is explored in Chapter 6, where we see that



whilst some pupils accept the offer of extra help as a supportive gesture, others may interpret it as a manifestation of their academic inadequacies.

The large amount of de-contextualised pupil progress and attainment data produced by the Department for Education and used by OFSTED as a primary means of judging standards in schools puts further pressure on teachers not to 'allow' the failure of any pupils, especially the groups on which there is a current national focus, for example, those who experience social and economic disadvantages. Emerging from Chapter 6 is an understanding of the difference between what I refer to as 'traditional' help, characterised by good pupil-teacher relationships and emerging naturally out of the understanding the teacher has of the child's progress, and the more formalized type whereby a pupil is required to give up their own time to take part in additional tuition sessions.

Personalised learning is currently presented, through official discourses, as part and parcel of good teaching. Having looked, in the earlier chapters, at how pupils and teachers experience some of the perceived effects of the policy's implementation, Chapter 7 takes a wider view and considers in some detail the complexities of teaching and discusses who might make decisions as to whether it is good or bad.

Pupils who, as never before, are measured, checked and led towards target grades may struggle to exercise agency and decision-making. Chapter 8, a shorter, but important chapter, examines how pupils try to exercise some degree of independence in their learning; a difficult thing for them to do given that many decisions about their school life are made by others, which may have the effect of positioning them as passive recipients rather than active agents. The final and concluding part of the thesis – Chapter 9 – pulls together some of the strands of personalised learning and summarises the tensions arising from the powerful influences of performativity on the work of schools. Some practical recommendations are put forward, with a final call for further debate to explore how education might be shaped around the

individual, and how the 'person' should be restored as the central figure in the debate.

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I will look at how personalised learning sits within a wider discourse of the perceived desirability of personalising a range of public services and explore some of the ways in which ‘the individual’ has risen in importance in modern society. I will also consider different ways in which personalised learning can be interpreted. The mechanisms by which schools must demonstrate that they are succeeding in raising attainment, meeting government floor standards and ensuring compliance with quality control systems such as OFSTED will be discussed, which will help us to understand the backdrop against which learning may, or may not, be personalised. In the final part of this chapter we explore some of the ways in which ‘the individual’ has risen in importance in our post-modern society.

**Personalising public services**

Policy makers have, for over a decade, promoted personalisation as a means to improve public services, such as health, social services and education. A publication by the think tank, Demos, written by Charles Leadbetter (2004) and entitled *Personalisation through Participation: A new Script for Public Services* launched the idea that service users could become co-designers and co-producers, thus increasing positive outcomes for individuals and society as a whole. Another pamphlet was then produced by Leadbetter (in 2004), which was aimed at schools and focused more directly on the personalisation of education. The foreword, written by Mike Gibbons, the then Lead Director of the Innovation Unit (a UK social enterprise group), states that:

Personalising learning is presented in this pamphlet as a powerful solution. It is a way of reforming the system to ensure that the learner is at the heart of it. Ultimately, personalisation cannot be seen as a stand-alone

initiative. It needs to be understood as a characteristic and a culture of a whole learning system.  
(Leadbetter, C. 2004: 3)

Also in 2004, the Department for Education and Skills published a pamphlet entitled 'A National Conversation about Personalised Learning' in which the concept was further developed. However, in this pamphlet it became so broad in its apparent scope that a vast array of things pertinent to 21<sup>st</sup> century schooling appeared to have been shoe horned into the concept of personalised learning. According to the DfES, the key components were: assessment for learning, effective teaching and learning strategies, curriculum entitlement and choice, school organisation and strong partnerships beyond the school. All these things were said to support five key principles of personalised learning, the first being that:

For children and young people, it means clear learning pathways through the education system and the motivation to become independent, e-literate, fulfilled, lifelong learners. (DfES, 2004: 7)

In 2004, David Miliband, the then Minister of State for School Standards, gave a speech entitled 'Personalised Learning, Building a New Relationship with Schools'. In this speech he outlined how, in order for educational standards to rise the approach schools should take is one that has: ' ... personalised learning at its heart' (Miliband, 2004: 2).

Mr Miliband went on to describe this in more detail and said:

This means a system in which every child matters; careful attention is paid to their individual learning styles, motivations and needs; there is rigorous use of pupil target setting linked to high quality formative assessment and marking; lessons are well-paced and enjoyable; and all pupils are supported by partnerships with others beyond the classroom. (ibid.:2)

In 2005, the Schools White Paper included a section entitled 'Personalisation' and whilst it embraces the idea that such an approach to learning would be beneficial to each and every individual child, the original co-participatory aspect so strongly advocated in Leadbetter's two

pamphlets seems to have been displaced by the standards agenda, which we will look at in the next section. According to the 2005 White Paper,

The Government explicitly promotes increased personalisation of learning as a means of improving levels of attainment.  
(The Schools White Paper, 2005: 13)

More detail is then provided with a description of some new and additional aims of personalised learning, i.e. the means to improve social mobility and help close gaps between the outcomes for different groups of learners. This fuller description of how personalised learning will bring about a wide range of educational improvements is as follows:

To drive up standards whilst also improving social mobility, we are determined to provide more personalised services for children and their families. Personalisation is the key to tackling the persistent achievement gaps between different social and ethnic groups. It means a tailored education for every child and young person, that gives them strength in the basics, stretches their aspirations, and builds their life chances. It will create opportunity for every child, regardless of their background. (ibid.: 13)

Echoing the idea that personalised learning is part and parcel of the raising standards agenda are the words of David Hopkins, in the National College of School Leadership pamphlet entitled 'Personalised Learning', published in 2004 and containing a number of articles written by different people. According to David Hopkins, the then Head of the DfES Effectiveness Unit,

We really need to recognize that unless personalised learning has a standards focus I don't think we're doing the best we can by the youngsters inside our system. (NCSL, 2004: 7)

The NCSL (2004) pamphlet also claims that personalised learning is about combining, amongst other things, assessment for learning and good classroom practice, but fails to provide any detail as to what that practice might look like. Johnson (2004) makes the point that the personalisation of learning underwent something of a change between its original conception

and the way it became interpreted as a tool with which to raise standards.

He states that:

With the implementation of the quasi-market in the 1990s, the position has been reached where it is taken for granted that a school's performance should be measured *entirely* (original italics) by the qualifications obtained by its pupils. ... the concept of personalised learning can be seen as a further development of this focus on individual achievement narrowly defined. This approach has the virtue of simplicity and, of particular importance with respect to choice and accountability, it is easily measured. (Johnson, 2004: 14)

Maguire et al. also note that, although the concept of personalised learning had a sound start – ‘a policy of impeccable provenance’ (Maguire et al. 2013: 324), the Government drive to raise standards in schools meant that it

... was being hybridized and reconstituted, blended with the dominant discourses of raising standards, to a large degree. (ibid.: 327)

In considering different interpretations of personalised learning, we can see that it is a contested concept, losing at least some of its original enablement and empowerment DNA on the journey to become a description of a mechanism for the delivery of better standards and improved social mobility.

### **The Standards Agenda**

Successive governments, believing that it is their mandate to raise educational standards, have developed a range of systems and processes that seek to establish how well each and every pupil is doing. Schools in England currently operate within a rigid framework of accountability and compliance, which has, at least in part, been a propellant towards their making ever-greater efforts to show that they are continuously engaged in raising attainment. One of the main ways in which policy makers seek to measure educational standards is through the administration of public examinations, with the majority of state school pupils taking General

Certificate of Secondary Education examinations (GCSE) in Year 11. The data from these assessments are then analysed and presented on the Department for Education website. The floor standard for schools was that, in 2014, 40% of pupils would gain five or more GCSEs, including Mathematics and English at grades A\* - C. In 2015, the floor target remained at 40% for those schools choosing not to opt into 'Progress 8' (a type of value-added measure that compares pupils' average grade across 8 subjects with others who had similar Key Stage 2 scores) and from 2016 all secondary providers will be expected to achieve a Progress 8 score of above -0.05.

The school effectiveness movement, beginning some thirty years ago, and which has played a major role in influencing these developments, has sought to concentrate the judgement of the quality of schools on how well their pupils have performed in public examinations. As pointed out by Gorrard (2010), amongst others, there are many different ways in which one could judge a school, such as how much pupils enjoy their education and how prepared they are to become citizens of the future. He also makes a strong case for the school effectiveness agenda to be abandoned given that it is often highly flawed data that is used to establish whether or not a school is doing well and on which many serious decisions are made, such as rewarding some institutions (a place at the top of the league table, for example) and punishing others in ways that include publically labelling them as failing and, in extreme cases, removing the Headteacher, the Governors and other members of staff.

The expectation, as evidenced by OFSTED inspections, is that for a school to be seen as effective and/or improving, it must make year on year advancements in the number of pupils who achieve the floor standards set by the Government. There are, however, inherent difficulties with the judging of school standards by using performance in public examinations as the principal measure, given that, during the last decade there have been significant amounts of change to the GCSE assessments with regard to subject content, the way pupils are tested and what it is they need to be able to do in order to achieve particular grades. Government spokespersons

often use the position of moving towards an assessment regime that is more rigorous, and more competitive in terms of the world's best as the reason for shifting grade boundaries and removing certain types of assessment such as the English speaking and listening examination. (2014). The 2016 Education White Paper makes reference to these issues and states that:

Recent international assessments, comparing the performance of our young people in 2011/2012 with their international peers, have shown that our education standards have remained static, at best, whilst other countries have moved ahead. Over the course of the last Parliament we put in place bold reforms to drive up standards in schools. We tackled grade inflation and restored the integrity of our qualifications ... . (Government White Paper: Education Excellence Everywhere 2016: 3)

The changes that have been recently implemented would appear to have been undertaken by wearers of rose-tinted retrospective glasses in the sense that they are spoken about as if they will move assessment back to a time when standards were higher. Beck (2008) describes this stance by policy makers as the evocation of a '... better past, of all that was sound and trustworthy ... '(2008: 126).

Given the large amount of change and churn within the assessment system, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether standards might be rising or falling. As noted by Torrance (2011), there is also evidence that, in spite of what might appear to have been a rise in pupil attainment, grade inflation may indicate that standards have, in fact, been falling.

### **The inspection regime**

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) inspection regime also features as a significant player in the government's drive to raise educational standards. Since its inception in 1992, multiple frameworks have manifested themselves each with their own emphasis on what schools should be able to show they are doing in order to provide a good education for all pupils. There are, of course, strong arguments to be put forward as to why a school inspection regime should



indeed be in place. Significant amounts of public money go into state schools and it is not unreasonable for the tax payer to want to be furnished with evidence that funds are being used to help all children make the best use of the educational opportunities on offer. However, as noted by Courtney (2016), what we have seen since the inception of OFSTED is that what schools must do in order to evidence this, shifts frequently. The education landscape pre-OFSTED was characterized by a significant degree of freedom for schools and teachers. Without a nationwide system to check that all children were being given a good education, wide variations existed in the quality of provision. Now, the penalties for a school that fails to show evidence that they are meeting all of OFSTED's requirements are severe, especially for those said by the inspectors to need 'Special Measures', the result of being placed at the lowest end of the four possible categories (Outstanding; Good; Requires Improvement; Inadequate). An overall 'Inadequate' judgment could now mean that the school is forced to become a sponsored academy, potentially giving up its individuality with the Governors relinquishing control to one of the large multi-academy chains. For a school that is said to require improvement, there will be a number of follow-up visits from inspectors with the expectation that by the time the next full OFSTED inspection occurs, it will be judged 'Good' or 'Outstanding'.

One of the most significant drivers of a school's likely success in an OFSTED inspection is a high level of attainment by pupils in public examinations. The compilation and publication of GCSE league tables adds a further element of pressure on schools to ensure that as many as possible of their Year 11 meet the required standard. A position at the top of the league tables generally ensures popularity with parents, greatly reducing the risk of under-subscription. Taking the Local Authority in which Kite Hill (the school where I am the Headteacher and where my research was undertaken) is situated – the River Valley Borough - it is clear, through looking at the published admission information, that the school with the highest GCSE attainment had far more applications for Year 7 places than the one with the lowest. The institution at the top of the River Valley Borough (RVB) league table

gained 72% 5+ GCSE grades A\*- C and received 420 applications for 186 places. The school at the bottom of the RVB league table achieved 44% 5+ GCSE grades A\*- C and received 245 applications for 150 places. The published information also details the places that were offered and accepted; the top attaining school would have been full in September but the lowest attaining was to have only 58 Year 7 pupils for their 150 available places. In North Hapford, a neighbouring Local Authority, the situation is similar with the school that achieved 80% 5+ A\*- C grades receiving 527 applications for 264 places, whilst the one that achieved 43% 5+ A\*- C had only 103 applications for 120 places.

Current state school funding arrangements in England mean that money is allocated according to the number of pupils on roll. In order, therefore, to ensure an adequate income, schools need to have every place filled. A falling roll threatens every aspect of the provision from the condition of the building to the breadth of the curriculum and the recruitment of staff.

Further pressure is added to the raising standards agenda in the form of a focus on different groups of pupils and how well they achieve both in relation to other groups in the same school and in schools across the country. Of particular concern in recent years has been the performance of disadvantaged pupils, which has often fallen far below that of those who are not disadvantaged. <sup>1</sup>As stated in the recent Sutton Trust Report, there has been a significant percentage point difference between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils in terms of them achieving 5+ A\*- C GCSE grades (including English and Mathematics). In percentage terms, this gap was 27.2 in 2011/12, 26.9 in 2012/2013 and 27.4 in 2013/14 (Sutton Trust, 2015: 11)

The Coalition Government of 2010-2015 instigated the Pupil Premium initiative which serves to ring-fence a portion of the funding received by

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<sup>1</sup> A pupil is considered as disadvantaged if she/he has been in receipt of Free School Meals at any time in the last 6 years, is looked-after, adopted or has been a service child for the last 5 years (Gov.UK: Academies Funding A-Z)

schools and for which they must demonstrate a closing of the achievement gap between socio-economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. There is also the performance of other groups of pupils that schools must focus on such as those who have low prior attainment. As explained in the OFSTED Handbook,

Inspection is primarily about evaluating how well individual children and learners benefit from the education provided by the school or provider. Inspection tests the school's or provider's response to individual needs by observing how well it helps all children and learners to make progress and fulfil their potential.

(Common Inspection Handbook, August 2015: 6)

The text then continues by listing 20 different groups for whom the inspectors will 'pay particular attention to the outcomes' (ibid.) Given that of these 20 groups, only two (ex-offenders and older learners) would not generally be pursuing their education in a school, pressure is on teachers to show that all the other 18 groups are doing well. Mansell (2011) uses the phrase 'hyper-accountability' to try and describe the sheer breadth and extent of the myriad ways in which UK schools today are measured, compared and judged.

Policy makers' ideas behind the creation and publication of large amounts of the type of data seen, for example, on the DFE Performance Table website, are primarily about showing how well or how badly schools are doing in terms of the performance of their pupils in the public examinations. Perhaps espousing the old adage about numbers not lying, policy makers are requiring more and more data to be made publicly available, in the hope, perhaps that somewhere in amongst them, irrefutable and dependable facts will be found. As explained by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, key drivers of school reforms are parental choice and accountability. In a speech at the Policy Exchange in 2014, he said:

Parents – and governments – must have accurate, fair and timely information about performance. So choice can be informed and state intervention proportionate. The strongest form of accountability

comes from the data generated by externally set and marked tests and the judgments made by expert inspectors. (From a speech by Michael Gove, 2014)

How helpful parents find the government school performance tables is not known, but the publication of this type of data is in keeping with a move by policy makers to shift their responsibility for the monitoring of public services to the forces exerted by the market. If a school is doing well, it is presumed that the exercising of parental choice will ensure it continues to operate. When the reverse happens, the school will wither on the vine and cease to be viable. The ethics of this process are, however, highly questionable given that young people may find their education irretrievably damaged as their school literally closes down around them. Apple (2005) explains how there is an increasing expectation for individuals to become consumers and undertake what can be extensive work in order to exercise the choice that they now have.

When services such as hospitals and schools are commodified, a good deal of the work that was formerly done by state employees, is shifted onto those using the service. (Apple, 2005: 16)

He also goes on to explain that whilst choice is often considered to be a good thing, for some people, the exercising of that choice requires access to certain goods and means, which they may not have. He asserts that:

The classed and raced specificities of this are crucial, since the ability to do such electronic searching and education for example is dependent on the availability of computers and especially time to engage in such actions. It requires resources – both temporal and financial to say nothing of emotional – that are differentially distributed. (ibid.: 16)

It is not surprising therefore, that in what has become a highly performative arena schools are seeking to maximise the attainment of all their pupils. As explained by Ball (2003), performativity is both a mechanism of control and a framework, which shapes the behaviour of those who work inside it. He describes it as:

... a technology, a culture and a mode of

regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). (Ball, 2003: 216)

Performativity permeates the contours of today's educational landscape. Government targets, curriculum control (e.g. the current emphasis on the English Baccalaureate subjects), teacher performance management, the rigidity of recent OFSTED inspection frameworks and the measuring of pupils' progress against externally set targets all work to influence the attitudes, ambitions, feelings and dispositions of those who work and learn in schools today. As stated by Gewirtz

... markets, target setting, performance monitoring and inspection, are not neutral mechanisms for 'improving' schools. They have embedded within them a set of values about what education is and is for. They function as powerful disciplinary mechanisms for transforming teacher subjectivities and the culture and values of classroom practice. (Gewirtz, 1997: 219)

It could also be argued that the machinery of tight surveillance, so favoured by policy makers, is strangely at odds with the pronounced freedoms for schools who have been strongly encouraged by the current Conservative Government to seek academy status in order, they say, to secure increased levels of autonomy. As noted by Apple

The seemingly contradictory discourse of competition, markets and choice on one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing and national curriculum on the other hand have created such a din that it is hard to hear anything else. (Apple, 2004: 15)

What exactly it is that schools might be freeing themselves from, were they to seek academy status, is not at all clear. It might also be the case, that far from empowering schools through increased autonomy, the fragmentation of education that we see occurring at the present time, is in fact tightening the centralised control and reducing the influence of local democratically elected council members.

The work of a number of commentators - for example, Apple (2005), Ozga (2009), Gorrard (2010) and Leckie and Goldstein (2017) – suggests that the requirement on schools to meet pre-determined standards coupled with ever increasing amounts of de-contextualised data made publicly available are resulting in the freedoms that schools previously enjoyed being quietly and efficiently euthanized. As explained by Apple

The ultimate result of an auditing culture of this kind is not the promised de-centralisation that plays such a significant role rhetorically in most neo-liberal self-understandings, but what seems to be a massive re-centralisation and what is best seen as a process of de-democratisation. (Apple, 2005: 15)

### **Target Setting**

In addition to trying to ensure that as many pupils make expected progress, pressure is on schools to help as many as possible to meet their externally set GCSE targets. There are a few different mechanisms available to schools in terms of establishing these targets, but one of the most often used systems is to have them set by an outside agency, such as the Fischer Family Trust who use the National Pupil Database to provide GCSE targets for individual pupils based on their prior attainment, i.e. what they achieved in their Key Stage Two Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) in Primary School. Through this process every pupil is given an individual target grade in each of the subjects she/he is studying. No consultation is carried out either with the pupil, the parents or the teachers, but some schools, such as Kite Hill, offer the subject departments the possibility of changing some of the targets with the proviso that if one pupil's target is moved up, another must be moved down. The reason for this is that when later calculations are carried out (i.e. after the GCSE results have been published) in order to establish the effectiveness of each department in terms of the percentage of pupils meeting their target, the basis on which the targets were adjusted must be the same across the school. The ideal is that all subject areas should add an equal amount of 'value' to the pupil in terms of how much progress each individual has made from their starting points; between subject differences are a possible cause for challenges during an OFSTED inspection as they

may indicate that the leadership of the school has not been successful at eradicating what could be viewed as an inequality of curriculum offer.

### **Intervention**

In an effort to ensure positive outcomes for all Year 11 pupils, as measured by the meeting of their GCSE targets, schools give over a great deal of time to the analysis of progress information (often called 'tracking data') that is gathered as pupils move through the school year, taking part in various assessment activities on the way. Departments and individual teachers may be held to account for an apparent lack of progress by particular pupils and in order to improve public examination outcomes, schools might provide additional tuition for certain learners, encouraging or requiring them to attend Saturday lessons, before/after-school/lunch-time sessions or holiday revision programmes. A quick look at a local school's website (in September 2016) revealed the following information on their home page:

## **After School and Saturday Revision Timetable**

**After-school Revision Timetable.**  
**Saturday Revision Timetable.**

(South Lane School)

Following the links gives the viewer a full day-to-day breakdown of the revision sessions for GCSE and A-level students, bearing in mind that those pupils would not be taking their examinations for at least 8 months.

These interventions are primarily focused on ensuring that pupils meet their targets, but there will often also be other types of support, such as mentoring, to try and help motivate and engage those who may be in need of further encouragement and guidance.

Whether the drive to personalise the education of pupils was born entirely out of today's performative agenda is unlikely; most of the teachers I have worked with over the last thirty years try to ensure that every child is

engaged in productive learning and that she/he is appropriately challenged and supported. However, now that the progress and attainment of each and every pupil has come under such close scrutiny, it is unsurprising that schools are increasingly finding ways to further adapt their practice so that individualised packages of teaching, support and intervention can be wrapped around the learners.

### **Societal shifts towards individualisation**

Some sociologists believe that life in a modern society is characterised by a breaking away from the old structures of tradition, family and class. Freedoms to be one's own person and to make one's own way through life bring both opportunity and risk. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim explain, much of the taken-for-granted sociological architecture of yesteryear has given way to self-definition, which the individual must decide on for her or himself. They state that:

Whatever we consider – God, nature, truth  
science, technology, morality, love marriage –  
modern life is turning them all into 'precarious  
freedoms'. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 2)

In this way, the concept of the individual as an important player comes to the foreground, becoming someone who, without the 'givens' that might once have restricted choice and opportunity, has a lot of decisions to make and lot of responsibility to take for her or his own life. The potential freedoms of modern life may well be precarious but there are many ways in which they also seem attractive and desirable. Observers of recent trends will have noticed the increasing number of social activities that revolve around the individual, such as the 'selfie' (a mobile phone photograph of oneself), the streaming of television programmes and videos 'on demand', the availability of cars that can be personalised with different coloured panels, the offer of a bottle of a well-known soft drink with one's own photograph as the label as well as goods and services that are advertised as being structured around the consumer, e.g. 'Time dedicated to you' - Magners' Irish Cider 2013; 'Non-stop You' – Lufthansa 2014; 'We start with



you’ – Curry’s PC World 2015. This move away from the communal and towards the individual arguably brings with it a sense that things that are personalised must, in some way, be better than things that are not. Also, as technology increasingly enables many services to be carried out without human interaction (e.g. on-line shopping), the need for people to be seen and recognized as individuals, as opposed to just part of a faceless crowd, has spawned the idea of things that purport to be personalised are, in some way, better and more connected to us as people who matter – i.e. personal, rather than impersonal. Education has not been immune to this trend and teachers are now more likely to experience requests from parents to adjust what they do inside and outside of the classroom so that their child can have, what the parent believes, is a better, more personalised education. As noted by Barton

... education is increasingly viewed as a private good rather than a public responsibility, thereby encouraging a self-interested approach to learning ... . (Barton 1997: 238)

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we examined the arguments originally put forward by those advocating the personalisation of public services and the subsequent shift within education policy discourse in the meanings associated with personalisation – from an idea to promote service users’ informed participation in the delivery of those services to a means to improve educational outcomes and promote social mobility. We also looked at the performative and managerialist background against which schools are currently operating and the way in which accountability mechanisms, such as target setting, impact on several aspects of their systems and processes. Clearly, there is a tension between policies that are designed to be responsive to the perspective of service users and to facilitate their autonomy and a policy agenda in which centralisation and standards are at the fore. The remainder of this thesis is concerned with exploring the particular forms of personalised education associated with contemporary standards-focussed policy agenda, how these are experienced by teachers

and pupils and what a more authentic approach to personalisation might look like.

The study was undertaken at Kite Hill Girls' School, an 11-19 Comprehensive in the South East of England, UK, where I am the Headteacher. I have been teaching for over 30 years and have had extensive experience as a senior leader. I was Head of a boys' school and subsequently a mixed school before taking up the Headship at Kite Hill in 2009. I continue to teach French to a Year 7 class as I gain great satisfaction from developing further my pedagogical skills. As a solo researcher with a role of significant responsibility, using my own institution reduced the need for me to be off-site for any prolonged periods of time and facilitated access to teacher and pupil participants. I have, for some time, been interested in how personalised learning plays out in my school, especially in recent years where increasing government focus on measurable pupil outcomes has driven much of our work in trying to ensure year on year high percentages of pupils successfully meeting their externally set GCSE targets. It was also a suitable school in which to undertake this research given that it is stable and, at the time the interviews were taking place, unlikely to be expecting an OFSTED inspection or anything else that might disrupt the day-to-day life of the school. Kite Hill has low staff turnover; it is popular and oversubscribed and there is relatively little incidence of pupils leaving or arriving outside of the usual transition points, i.e. at age 11 and 16.

Researching into an educational topic has become a culturally accepted and approved activity at Kite Hill especially since, in 2013, I introduced a school-based Masters' Degree in association with a local University, initially fully funded, for any teacher interested in undertaking one. Pupils at Kite Hill have, therefore, become quite used to taking part in teachers' research projects.

The day-to-day life of the school runs smoothly. OFSTED graded us as 'Good' with two 'Outstanding' aspects (Behaviour and Safety; Leadership and

Management) at their last visit in 2012 and there is low incidence of disruption of any type. Girls generally speak positively about the school. I was confident, therefore, that my conducting research at Kite Hill would not, in any way, interfere with its stability.

## **The Approach**

Ten teachers and twenty pupils from Years 12 and 13 took part in semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences, feelings and ideas about personalised learning. Appendix 1 lists the questions asked of the teachers and Appendix 2, the questions asked of the pupils. The themes I selected for the teachers included some specifics regarding particular pedagogical approaches, such as differentiation. Questions were also asked about intervention, especially in terms of the extra help that is given to some learners outside of the normal time allocated for teaching. For the pupils, the themes were similar, but the questions were phrased in a way that was more accessible, such as the first one, which invited them to tell me about one of their best lessons. I favoured the use of semi-structured interviews because I could both ensure that all participants were asked the same questions, but also allow for further discussion and for the conversation to flow naturally. As noted by Freebody:

Semi-structured interviews aim to have something of the best of both worlds by establishing a core of issues to be covered, but at the same time leaving the sequence and the relevances of the interviewee free to vary, around and out from that core. (Freebody, 2003: 133)

I decided that the sample group of pupils would need to be larger than that of the teachers as it was likely they might not say as much as the adults. In terms of generalizability, a small single school case study such as mine could not be considered as able to generate well-tested new phenomena. However, there is no evidence to suggest that pupils' and teachers' experience of personalised learning at Kite Hill is in any way a-typical of

those who learn and work in a climate of accountability, which increasingly focuses on the measurable outcomes for individuals and groups of learners. Using a case study approach enabled me to focus attention on a current issue in England, namely the prioritisation of pupil performance in terms of judging school quality together with an increasing expectation from policy makers that education will be adjusted to meet the perceived needs of the learners. Hamel et al. make the point that a case study can facilitate an understanding that moves from 'local' to 'global' and also describe how, by choosing carefully the methodology, it can assist with understanding how something singular, i.e. the case study, maps onto a broader church. They explain that:

Singularity is thus characterized as a concentration of the global in the local. Singularity is not perceived as a particular feature of a fact, a species or a thing. It is seen, rather, as characterizing a fact, species or a thing. (Hamel et al. 1993: 38)

The sample number (10) of teachers gave enough scope for several different subject areas to be represented as well as being a manageable number for a single researcher. Some of those who took part were highly experienced, having taught for a long period of time, (in one case 36 years), and others were relatively inexperienced. Appendix 3 shows a table of the key characteristics of the teacher interviewees.

During the time I undertook this case study, I wrote some field notes, which consisted mainly of observations I made and conversations I had about the key themes of my interests. I include some extracts from my field notes throughout, where pertinent to the matters under discussion.

I decided not to review the existing literature in the traditional manner of devoting a chapter to it, and instead chose to discuss the findings of other researchers in the appropriate places throughout this thesis. Such an approach has also enabled me to give strong emphasis to the voices of both teachers and pupils and relate their lived experiences to findings from sociologists and others who have contributed to the body of referenced

literature, which consists of academic papers, books, pamphlets, OFSTED reports and newspaper articles.

The personalisation of education, and in particular, the practices of differentiation, i.e. where teachers adapt the content and delivery of their lessons to take into account the perceived needs of the pupils, and targeted intervention, are examined in this enquiry by means of qualitative investigation. Social constructionism provides the framework for this study as I look at how pupils and teachers build and change their identities through their experiences of teaching and learning in an education system that, through mainly external pressures, becomes ever more focused on the provision of individualised arrangements. As I consider competing discourses, which contribute to ideas and beliefs about how teachers should be teaching, how they should be relating to pupils and to what extent they are or are not successfully implementing successive government initiatives, it becomes possible to see how the language of OFSTED reports, national and local policies, educational literature, commercially produced educational products and the media begin to influence classroom practices, pupil/teacher relationships and the self-images of learners and teachers. As explained by Burr, these different discourses are not just sources of information, but texts in which the language begins to shape the thoughts and actions of the actors. She notes that,

... macro social constructionism emphasises the way that the forms of language available to us set limits upon, or at least strongly channel, not only what we think and say, but also what we can do or what can be done to us. (Burr, 2003: 63)

In other words, the official discourses, such as those emanating from government bodies and which describe what teachers are expected to do, can have the effect of funneling their energies into prioritising the required behaviours to the exclusion, at least in part, of other activities which might be appreciated by stakeholders more closely involved in the life of the school, such as the learners themselves. These behaviours are enacted, spoken about, thought about and written about so that they become woven

into the day-to-day reality of teaching and learning. Burr also explains how discourse frames our experiences. She states that,

Discourses make it possible for us to see the world in a certain way, producing our 'knowledge' of the world, which has power implications because it brings with it particular possibilities for acting in the world. (Burr, 2003: 25)

In the Kite Hill study, I look at how the enactment of government policies changes not only how teachers might approach their daily work, but how they also begin to see themselves and their pupils in terms of professional and learner identities.

It is fully acknowledged that there is no 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1986) and that my motivation for undertaking this research was, in part, influenced by my thirty years as a teacher and the changes that I have experienced along the way. I wanted to understand better how personalised learning is experienced in a highly performative setting, where over the last three decades an ever tighter grip by policy makers on what schools are required to do has shaped and changed not only systems and processes, but teaching and learning too.

The role of the insider researcher has been subject to considerable discussion, with some writers critical of the potential overlapping of the teacher and researcher roles, e.g. Hammersley (1993). However, others stress the importance of insider teacher research, such as Burke and Kirton, who state that:

The significance of insider research should not be underestimated. Methodologies that support knowledge production from an insider perspective and at the localized level are of great value in developing more nuanced and complex understandings of educational experiences, practices and relations. (2006:2)

In considering my own dual roles as both the Headteacher and researcher at Kite Hill, I reflected that there was potential for a blurring of the boundaries between the information about the school that I possess through being the Headteacher and the knowledge I gained through carrying out my research. As pointed out by Scott, it can be hard for insider researchers to tell '... where the data stopped and the rest of our lives started' (1985:120). I concluded, however, that as a case study, i.e. an investigation in order to understand personalised learning through the lived experiences of pupils and teachers, I was, as a 'teaching' Head, part of that story and had struggled with the same challenges the teachers described to me, such as the enormously time consuming nature of personalising worksheets. The knowledge I therefore brought to the research interviews was primarily about my experiences regarding the issue at hand – i.e. personalised learning – rather than a matter that I, as Head, might take a more managerial line on, e.g. the marking of pupils' written work. The teachers would also have been aware that I have never led a training session on personalised learning and never spoken about it as something they should or should not be doing. It is also, perhaps, worth noting that I did not carry out any triangulation during the course of my research, e.g. undertaking observations of either teachers or pupils in lessons. In this sense, the participants were free to say whatever they wished without fearing that I could refute their statements by referring to other sources of evidence. These things, would, I hoped, help the participants feel that sharing with me their experiences of personalised learning would be something they could do without fear of any negative repercussions.

In reflecting on the issues of being an insider researcher, one of the key questions to be considered is whether or not my case study might have been improved had I carried out my research in another school, i.e. would the outsider perspective have enabled better or richer data to be collected. Whilst it is probably not possible to find the answer to this question, it may be useful to reframe the standpoint of judging one perspective to be better than the other and instead, note the ideas of Mercer (2007) who argues that



it might be more helpful to approach the insider/outsider positions as being on a continuum rather than in opposition to each other.

My overall aim through conducting the interviews was, as described by Brinkmann and Kvale

...to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences ... (2015: 3)

In many of the top-down developments in schools (and by 'top', I mean from policy makers), the voices of teachers and pupils are barely heard when significant changes are introduced into schools. It is quite common for new initiatives to be launched with little or no consultation with those working and learning in schools. There are, however, a number of researchers who have explored how the implementation of these changes impact on the day-to-day lives of teachers and pupils both in and outside of the classroom. See, for example, Lacey (1970), Ball (1981), Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1993), Gewirtz, (1997), Fielding (1999), Archer (2003), Ball (2003) Reay and Wiliam (2006), Beck (2008) Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) and Ball (2010). This study seeks to explore how the move towards greater personalisation of learning, as embodied in the pedagogical practices of differentiation and targeted intervention impacts on the way teachers approach their work and how pupils make sense of their life at school. The aim of finding out first hand about the experiences of these key stakeholders informed the reason for choosing interviews over other research methods, such as questionnaires, because it offered the opportunity for teachers and pupils to have the voice that they had previously perhaps been denied. The interviews were semi-structured and were based around the asking of a series of questions. However, I also tried to be responsive to anything that the interviewees seemed to want to talk about. Facilitating a more free-flowing conversational element into my interviewing of the participants helped provide opportunities for further discussion.

After the transcription of all thirty interviews, I analysed and coded them using the grounded theory approach. This seemed to be the most appropriate way forward in that it allowed the lived experiences of the

interviewees to be given most weight. Applying the process of open coding enabled me to analyse the texts and gain a deeper understanding of what was said by the participants. As explained by Strauss and Corbin

... to ... name and develop concepts, we must open up the text and expose the thoughts, ideas, and meanings contained therein. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:102)

After extensive reading and re-reading of the transcripts, I undertook a line-by-line analysis, referred to by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as 'micro-analysis'. This helped me to prepare for the following stage of open coding, a process which provided a way to see similarities, links and relationships within the data. I was then able to group together these events, viewpoints and experiences, a process that Strauss and Corbin describe as 'conceptualizing'. They further explain this stage of using grounded theory as follows:

A concept is a **labeled phenomenon**. (Emboldening in original). It is an abstract representation of an event, object, or action/interaction that a researcher identifies as being significant in the data. The purpose behind naming phenomena is to enable researchers to group similar events, happenings and objects under a common heading or classification. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 103)

My approach to the grouping and labelling stage of the analysis was to work through the transcribed interviews using coloured pencils to shade over sections of the data that seemed to share similar characteristics. For example, when looking at the responses of the teacher participants on the issue of differentiating classroom resources, I began to see an emerging picture of the teacher trying to protect the learners' self-esteem. I therefore continued to work through the data, and used the same colour to shade in all the phrases, comments and events that echoed the emerging concept of a protective stance as reflected in the teachers' beliefs, thoughts and behaviours.

Two initial sets of codes emerged from the data, one for the pupils and one for the teachers. After further reading and re-reading I made notes on these initial findings and discussed them with my supervisors. To provide a visual

form to my developing codes, I used large sheets of card on which to bring together, in a literal and physical way, the data that sat within the different categories. This approach enabled me to re-consider some of my initial findings and give further thought to what I believed to be 'going on' in my data.

After this, some of the codes were subsumed into others and a final total of 9 codes from the teacher data and 10 from the pupil data were decided upon. Around these central categories were clustered some associated themes. For example, around the code that I labelled 'help', I added what I saw as different facets of 'help' such as 'self-help', 'forced help' and 'natural help'. A point of saturation was reached when it became clear that no new information was emerging from the data and nothing else could be added to the codes. As a researcher, it was important for me to approach the reading of the transcripts with an open a mind as possible and to allow the codes to form from the data, rather than to search for any pre-established concepts. As explained by Glaser and Strauss (1967)

... grounded theory is derived from data and  
illustrated by characteristic examples of data. (ibid.: 5)

Using social constructionism as a theoretical lens helped me to understand that I was not so much seeking to discover a hitherto uncovered truth, but to listen, analyse and try to understand how pupils and teachers made sense of the personalisation of education. My interest lay in the way it might be enacted, navigated, reworked or even, perhaps, ignored. As noted by Burr, social constructionism opposes the view that a 'grand theory' will unlock a truth or reveal a new reality. She maintains that

... the very word, 'discover' presupposes an  
existing, stable reality that can be revealed by  
observation and analysis, an idea quite opposed  
to social constructionism. (Burr, 1995: 12)

## **Ethical considerations**

As both the researcher and the Headteacher of the school, one of the first ethical issues I considered was that participants could have felt under pressure to take part in the interviews and/or to answer questions in a particular way, i.e. to say the 'right' things to the person at the top of the hierarchy. A lot of care was therefore exercised to ensure that participants were recruited in a manner that was as pressure-free as possible. I avoided approaching pupils directly and, instead, used posters to attract potential interviewees together with signposting from a member of staff who saw more of the pupils on a daily basis (Sixth Form Learning Mentor) and was, therefore, less likely to be seen as a powerful and potentially oppressive individual.

All the pupil participants were in either Year 12 or Year 13. These older learners were, I thought, more likely to feel comfortable discussing their education and would generally have had a longer period in the school, thus furnishing them with more experiences on which to draw. Every effort was made to put both the pupil and the teacher participants at their ease during the interviews and I made sure that I did not ask any questions that could have potentially made them vulnerable to exposure regarding possible shortcomings, either personal or, in the case of the teachers, something in their professional practice.

The teachers who took part in the study were all established members of staff and with whom I had had previous, informal discussions about personalisation, differentiation and intervention.

No participants asked to withdraw or to have their data withdrawn and every effort was made to allow plenty of time for the interviews and for them to be carried out in a relaxing and pleasant environment. Anonymity was assured by assigning all pupils a pseudonym, taking care not to use any actual names of girls currently on role in Years 12 and 13. Teachers are referred to by fictional sets of initials, with care taken not to use any

combinations that identified actual staff members working at Kite Hill at the time of the research.

All participants were given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form (see appendices 4 and 5). The interviews took place during the normal school day so as not to impact negatively on the work-life balance of the participants. My Headteacher's office was used, which although to an outsider might seem like a place of some potential discomfort, is a large and pleasant space, with plants and comfortable chairs. It is in a quiet part of the school, which minimised any potential for interruptions. The interviews took between 12 and 35 minutes, the end of each one occurring naturally with the asking of the final question and followed by any subsequent discussion. I regularly asked participants if they could give examples of the instances they described so as to try and build a richer data set. As a Headteacher who has always taught, and takes great pride in doing so, the teachers and some of the pupils know me not just as the leader of Kite Hill, but as a teacher of French, too. Copies of my King's Institution Focussed Study have been freely available to all teachers and, over the 7 years of my Headship at Kite Hill, I have had many discussions with colleagues about the impact of government directives, some of which seem to be about making improvements to pupils' education, but which can often have unintended and unwelcome consequences. All these things, I believe, helped the interviewees to open up and talk about the things that were important to them.

My belief was that the participants and I would, through the asking and answering of questions, construct new insights into learning and teaching. We would be 'co-constructors of knowledge' (Brinkam and Kvale, 2015: 22) and, having undertaken my King's Institution Focussed Study at Kite Hill, I was confident that both teachers and pupils appreciated my genuine desire to improve the school and that, by their involvement in this new piece of research, they would be helping me to accomplish this. As noted by Charmaz

Our respect for our research participants  
pervades how we collect data and shapes the  
content of our data. We demonstrate our respect  
by making concerted efforts to learn about  
their views and actions and to try to  
understand their lives from their perspectives.  
(Charmaz, 2006: 19)

Over the forthcoming chapters I will be looking at the context in which personalised learning sits, both in terms of the policies from which it emanates and the way in which it plays out at Kite Hill. I will examine some of the pressures and challenges in English schools, looking in particular at how teachers try to implement government initiatives that seek to align more closely what is taught, and how it is taught with pre-determined pupil needs and externally set pupil targets. Towards the middle of the thesis we will look at how pupils feel about their learning, especially in terms of lessons where worksheets and questions at different levels are used. The often hidden effects of institutionalised help and intervention are then explored along with the impact of an increasingly performative school experience on the self-image of the learners. Given that personalised learning and differentiation are currently seen by OFSTED and the DFE as part and parcel of good teaching, an examination of the difficulties of defining this concept is offered. We will also learn about the efforts of pupils to retain some control and power over their own learning. A summary of this qualitative study constitutes the final chapter together with some ideas about changes that might be made in schools by way of lessons learnt.

## **Chapter Three** **Meeting pupils' needs – motherhood and apple pie or a bitter cup?**

### **Introduction**

It seems reasonable to claim that, for any service to be truly personalised, the assumption would be that the better the needs of the user are understood, the better the service can be shaped around the individual. In this chapter we will look at how teachers try to understand and respond to their pupils' needs. We will also look at how 'pupil need' is a contested concept with competing definitions jostling for supremacy and at some of the contestations around pupil grouping and labelling practices, before turning to the specific case of pupils identified as having special educational needs. Here we will consider in particular some of the harms associated with well-intentioned attempts to categorise and meet the needs of learners identified as belonging to this cohort.

For perhaps any human being, the idea of having one's needs met is an attractive prospect. 'Need', however, is not so easily defined, especially in something as complex as a human being where needs can range from a very small addition to the status quo (a cup of tea, for example, at the end of a long and tiring day) to something which could mean the difference between life and death, e.g. a heart transplant. This vast range of potential human need can be, perhaps, better understood by the explanations of Maslow (1943) who developed his theory of human motivation by suggesting that there were five types of need ranging from the 'physiological' to 'self-actualization', that is from basic physical need such as that of hunger to the need to live a rewarding and fulfilled life. He also argued that, 'Man is a perpetually wanting animal' (Maslow, 1943: 370). This infers, perhaps, that needs are continuous and difficult to satisfy. New parents know that as soon as their child is born, nearly all their time becomes focussed on meeting the baby's needs. Much time is devoted in schools too in considering how pupils' needs can be best met, from the most basic (what, for example, should be

served in the canteen) to the higher level needs such as how to help pupils fulfill their potential.

### **Pupils' needs – what are they and who decides?**

Recently published OFSTED reports make extensive reference to how schools appear either to be meeting, or not meeting, the needs of their pupils. Excerpts from reports, such as those below, make it clear that the visiting inspectors will expect to see evidence of this. The school about which the following statement was made is seen as doing a good job of meeting at least some of its pupils' needs. The inspectors reported that:

Students who are identified for further reading support follow clear, well-planned reading programmes. These successfully raise their reading ages and meet their literacy needs. (North Liverpool Academy, OFSTED inspection, 28-29 April 2015)

The next statement, however, illustrates an example of the kind of criticism likely to be levelled at a school that does not seem to be meeting its pupils' needs.

Work given to students does not always match their needs. This is often the case for the more able who do not have enough opportunities to think differently about problems, or have more time to explore a wide range of solutions for themselves. For example, in mathematics, more able students are often asked to move through the same work as other students, but faster, in order to gain access to questions they could usefully have begun with. (Bexhill High Academy, Ofsted inspection 29-30 April 2015)

In spite of the positive comments made about the first school, both North Liverpool Academy and Bexhill High Academy are, according to their April 2015 OFSTED reports, 'Requiring Improvement'. Clearly, even the apparent successful meeting of some pupils' needs is insufficient to bring about a judgment of 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. However, the issue that is perhaps of greater concern is the idea that pupils' needs can be so quickly identified and quantified by an external observer who may only be present in a lesson for as short a period as twenty minutes. How exactly the visiting inspectors



can be so confident in diagnosing pupils' needs and then ascertaining how well a school is meeting, or not meeting them is clearly a matter for some debate. Looking once again at the comments about the pupils at North Liverpool Academy whose literacy needs, states the inspection report, are being met, therein also lies the question as to what, exactly, a 'literacy need' is. Such a need could, conceivably, be to appreciate the colourful stories of Chaucer or take part in the acting out of a Shakespeare play, but in the extract from the OFSTED report, it would seem that the inspectors are confident that the pupils' literacy needs have been met given that the approach taken by the school has brought about a rise in the learners' reading ages. A higher score, therefore, on an artificially constructed scale, becomes a proxy for a need being met. With little or no conversation with the pupils or their teachers, the inspector has decided that in the case of learners who are receiving support for their reading, their need is to get a higher score on this scale.

The reduction of need into an assumed deficit is an example of how the rich, exciting, chaotic and thrilling thing that is education, can be surgically reduced into an activity which seeks primarily to move the participants (i.e. the pupils) from one point on a scale to a higher one. It is also an example of what I have come to refer to as the practice of 'edumetrics', i.e. the measuring of education as if it were a type of industrial production system (See Ceska, 2013).

For Bexhill High, it was deemed by the OFSTED team that some of their pupils' needs were not being met, especially those that the inspectors believed to be 'more able'. Once this label had been attached to a group of pupils, their needs were thought to centre on the completion of more difficult work. Again, quite probably without any sort of consultation with the pupils or teachers, the inspectors decided that the needs of the 'more able' learners were to do more complicated work straight away, without working through the less demanding activities, that other pupils, presumably those the inspectors did not think to be so able, were doing. An alternative explanation as to why the pupils deemed to be more able were

doing easier tasks first, could have been that the teacher knew they lacked confidence in this particular topic and felt that they would therefore benefit from starting with something not so challenging. In this scenario, however, it would seem that the professional judgment of the teacher in terms of deciding how her pupils' needs should be met, was disregarded by the OFSTED inspector who arrived, instead, at the possibly over-hasty conclusion that able pupils should be doing more difficult work right from the start of the lesson.

For pupils in both North Liverpool Academy and Bexhill High, the pronouncement on their educational needs was, for the OFSTED inspectors, a straightforward process. It also appeared that once the inspectors had decided upon the needs of particular groups of pupils, it was another relatively simple thing for them to observe how their teachers were either succeeding in, or failing to meet those needs, whether of a literacy or mathematical variety. The knowledge of the inspectors, therefore, becomes the dominant player in decisions about what should be happening in the classroom with the teachers' knowledge sidelined or ignored. Whether or not teachers can lay claim to a distinct body of knowledge is a contested issue and linked, at least in part, to the issue of teacher competence, the improvement of which has long been on the policy makers' radar.

Short (1985) makes the point that competence is difficult to define and is particularly problematic in the case of teachers who lack the security of a durable definition of what exactly 'good' teaching is. What can be established, however, is that in high stakes inspections, the inspectors are positioned as having a type of knowledge superior to that of the classroom teachers. Exactly what knowledge teachers do possess has been subject to some considerable debate together with the degree to which they should be in control of their own work (Winch 2004). In the case of teachers subjected to high levels of surveillance, through, for example, the implementation of rigid inspection regimes, it appears that both their knowledge and their pedagogical techniques, i.e. the decisions about what should be happening in

their classrooms, are deemed to be of little importance in that they can so easily be overruled by the inspectors.

The current OFSTED framework makes it clear that, in order for a school to secure a good or better judgment, all groups of pupils must be seen to be making expected, or better than expected, progress. Before arriving at a school, the team of inspectors will have had the opportunity to peruse what is known as the 'RAISEonline' documents containing highly detailed information about the performance, in the most recent GCSE examinations, of different groups of pupils, e.g. those deemed to have low prior attainment, those of middle ability and those who are 'most able'. Also, there will be information about pupils who have a Special Educational Need, those who have English as a Second Language and those for whom the school receives the Pupil Premium, money ring-fenced in the budget to be spent on closing the gap between the achievement of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils (those who receive Free School Meals or have received them in the last six years, those who are in the care of the Local Authority or who have been adopted and those who have been Service Children in the last five years) and non-disadvantaged pupils.

For a teacher in a classroom, this retrospective measuring of the performance of different groups of pupils means that in addition to considering the needs of the pupils that she/he has come to understand using her/his own professional judgment, thought must also be given to considering whether, during the course of the lessons, explanations, questioning, tasks and activities will be sufficiently visibly measurable by a potential observer in terms of how effective they are in meeting the needs of the different, official RAISEonline pupil groups, of which there could be as many as six. However, in every class, there will be children who are not members of any of the RAISEonline groups but who might, nonetheless, have particular needs. There could, for example, be learners who need lots of reassurance because of a lack of confidence. There will also be those whose over-exuberance needs calming down or those who require repeated reminders to stay on task. The advice that I, as a practitioner with over

thirty years' experience in the classroom, would give to a novice teacher, is to get to know the learners as quickly as you can. There is, as far as I am aware, no better way of aligning pedagogical approaches to the needs of the pupils.

There exists, then, in every class, the RAISEonline groups, the groups as defined by OFSTED, and the groups of pupils that the teacher her/himself has come to recognize, such as those who are shy, nervous, confident, talkative, hard working, easily distracted, well-organized, calm or fidgety. However, given the importance attached to the measuring of the performance of the 'official' groups, it could potentially mean that the teachers come to prioritize these externally measured groups over those identified using their own professional judgment in terms of the attention, support and help given to the pupils. This subjugation of what could be deemed the teachers' knowledge to the dominant official knowledge, can be seen as part of a wider issue as to whether or not teachers do, in fact, have possession of any actual, definable body of knowledge and skills which could lead to the acceptance of teaching as a profession. Echoing the views of Short (1985) and Winch (2004) in terms of how teachers are positioned as autonomous professionals, Beck notes that this is an ongoing difficulty. He states that

Claims to a distinctive expertise, however, have proved notoriously difficult to demonstrate convincingly, not least because of teachers' allegiance to competing pedagogic ideologies. (Beck, 2008: 122)

In considering 'pupil need', there is a tension between how a teacher might frame the concept and the official discourse of a need occurring because of a perceived deficit, such as in the case of pupils who are deemed to have Low Prior Attainment. The lack of available evidence to support the teachers' knowledge as sufficiently professional so as to withstand attacks from those positioned as having superior knowledge ensures that the battle continues. It is also worth reflecting on how parents and the pupils themselves might also have views on what is needed by way of teaching or support and

whether there is any readily available mechanism for those views to be heard and responded to.

### **Pupil grouping as a means of meeting pupils' needs**

The placing of pupils into organized groups is a well-known approach in the attempt to offer them a more personalised learning experience. It brings, however, contested advantages and disadvantages and is likely to remain a focus for continuing discussion.

The identification of perceived pupil need and the attempt to meet those needs has driven much of the work in schools with regard to how sets, streams and groups are put together. The debate on whether it is better for pupils to be taught in mixed ability groups or 'streamed' or 'set' by ability, continues apace. The practice of streaming (where pupils are taught all their subjects in groups segregated by ability) is thought to contribute to the under-achievement of working class children and has been the subject of a number of studies, including those by Lacey (1970) and Ball (1981). The placing of pupils in sets (where pupils are taught in different ability groups but not necessarily in the same group for each subject) is certainly not a new practice and one promoted as being the most appropriate way to teach, for example, in the Labour Party's 1997 education White Paper, which stated that,

... unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that setting should be the norm in secondary schools. (Excellence in Schools 1997: 38)

Pupils' experiences of being taught in sets was explored in a study by Boaler, Wiliam and Brown (2000), which examined the effects of setting by ability on the learning of Mathematics by secondary age pupils. See also Hallam and Deathe (2002), Hallam and Ireson (2006) and Abraham (2008). Beliefs commonly held by parents and pupils tend to be around the idea that a place in the top set is highly desirable and much better than one in a lower set. As a Headteacher, it is not unusual for me to be asked by a parent for their child

to be moved up a set whereas requests for moves in the other direction are very rare. As noted by Reay, in an interview with a Head of Science, there was strong parental demand for setting or streaming when those parents believed that their children would be amongst those selected for the top groups. She said:

Parents are a lot more involved in things and demand a lot more for the students here and they want kids in higher groups or ... they want streaming when they think their kids are in the higher groups ...'. (Claire, Head of Science) (Reay, 1998: 550)

Also, Charlton et al. note this tendency for parents to want grouping by ability if they think their children are going to be at the top end of things. One of their interviewees (an Acting Deputy Head) explained it like this:

We have really ambitious parents and they want their children in the top class. And the principal in my own local area high school said the same thing to me when I went as a parent to an information night. He said: 'We have two, what we call, extension classes and we have them because parents want them and they want to feel that their child is in them. (Charlton et al. 2007: 465)

Other commonly held beliefs are that the children in each set are of almost identical ability, bringing to bear both the concept of ability as something fixed and the apparent 'sameness' of pupils in any one set. As noted by Boaler et al.,

... setted lessons are often conducted as though students are not only similar, but identical – in terms of ability, preferred learning style and pace of working. (Boaler, Wiliam and Brown, 2000: 640)

However, even taking ability as something fixed and relatively unchanging, it would be unlikely that all the learners in a particular group have it in exactly the same amount. Given that there are likely to be four or five sets, some pupils will be 'on the edge' of a particular group. This means that if a teacher pitches the lesson mainly at one level and does not take into account the different starting points of the pupils, some of them may find that they do not understand the topic and what it is they have to do. For the teachers in Boaler, Brown and Wiliam's (2000) study, it seemed that they were

inclined to see the learners in the various sets as all being able to work at the pace she/he had decided would be suitable for the children in that group. This became apparent in the lesson observation the researchers undertook of a top set lesson where the teaching was characterised by a very fast pace. So fast, that it seemed there was no time for the teacher to give anything more than a brief explanation. Also, perhaps because the teacher believed that all the children in the top set should only be there if they could 'keep up', comments were heard such as, 'You should be able to do this, you're in the top set' (Boaler, Brown and Wiliam, 2000: 635). Perhaps not surprisingly, this had a negative effect on significant numbers of pupils who told the researchers that they were unhappy with their top set place and felt that there might be more time and more opportunity to understand things better if they were to move down to a lower set.

However, pupils in the lower sets did not seem to be any more content with their learning than their top set peers. Serious problems associated with being taught in a low set included having a series of different teachers, teachers who mainly taught other subjects and being given low level work that was too easy. Once again, significant numbers of pupils told the researchers how unhappy they were and that they doubted they were learning very much. See also Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004).

The use of setting to meet the perceived needs of pupils was shown in Boaler, Brown and Wiliam's (2000) study to be largely ineffective in terms of how satisfied the pupils felt about their learning. Schools today must demonstrate that pupils are meeting or exceeding expected outcomes, as informed by their attainment at KS2 and as illustrated by their success in public examinations. There may therefore be some decisions made by the schools that favour performativity, i.e. procedures and approaches to teaching, which will maximize the chance of high public examination grades, over pupil preferences in terms of how they feel they learn best. Sukhnandan and Lee (1998) suggest that any type of grouping by ability will impact on pupils' experiences of school and may do so in a wide range of

areas including their self-perception, their friendships or the degree to which they involve themselves in the life of the school. These things may then affect the progress they make in their learning.

Whilst learners may prefer mixed ability teaching, which was certainly a view expressed by those who took part in Boaler et al.'s (2000) study, the pressure now on teachers to ensure excellent examination results for all pupils could mean that a school structures its teaching so that it is essentially doing what is best for the results rather than what might be best for the pupils in terms of helping them to have a rewarding and satisfying learning experience.

Mixed ability teaching is often heralded as a better way to meet pupils' needs and another study by Boaler (1997) drew the conclusion that pupils preferred working in mixed ability classes because it enabled them to understand their Mathematics work better. However, by 'mixed ability', Boaler seems only to refer to the practice of pupils working from self-directed booklets with little whole class input from the teacher. There is, of course a different approach that teachers can take to mixed-ability teaching, which is to try and teach the same topic to the whole class, but to adjust what they are doing to meet the various pupils' needs. More about this practice will be explored in the next chapter.

In the approach to mixed ability teaching whereby pupils work on booklets at their own pace, it is seen as almost without question that they will choose the level that is 'right' for them, i.e. at exactly the appropriate level of difficulty so that they are neither under nor over-challenged. The pupils interviewed for the Boaler study (1997) maintained that their preference for mixed ability was not predicated on them being able to get away with doing less work. It might, however, be reasonable to suggest that it would be fairly unlikely that a pupil would admit to preferring something because it gave license for an easier life. When pupils are given a choice about what level of work they can do, it is not unknown for some to select something that their teacher would consider as too easy. Pupils sometimes make this



type of choice because they feel confident on that topic and enjoy the associated feelings of success. It may also be because they are unwilling to challenge themselves with something harder as they are uncomfortable in what can be termed the 'struggle zone'.

### **Meeting pupils' needs – the teachers' experiences at Kite Hill**

At Kite Hill, the teachers have, over the last five years or so, been reflecting on, and received training for, pedagogical practices such as differentiation, i.e. the way in which tasks, questioning and homework can be tailored to try and make the pupils' written and oral work both accessible and stretching. This is a difficult thing to do as it requires not only in-depth knowledge about where each of the pupils is in terms of their progress, but also a great deal of subtlety so as to avoid drawing attention to pupils who may be in receipt of work that looks to be easier and, as a result, become self-conscious and begin to doubt themselves as capable learners. More about this will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Kite Hill has been compliant with Government directives that seek to focus the teachers' attentions on the attainment and achievement of particular groups such as pupils who seem not to have made good progress at Primary School, and, as such, are deemed to be part of the Low Prior Attainment group, or those for whom we receive Pupil Premium funding. The expectation from regulatory bodies, such as OFSTED, is that knowledge about the different groups of pupils is owned and acted upon not only by Senior Leaders, but by classroom teachers too. This standpoint is illustrated by the following extract from my Field Notes:

*At a Local Authority meeting for all the Secondary Headteachers, the invited speaker, (one of Her Majesty's Inspectors) explained how things must improve in terms of the outcomes for pupils for whom the schools receive Pupil Premium funding. She said that when she goes into the classroom of, for example, a Main Scale English Teacher, she will expect them to know who these pupils are and to have developed an approach to ensure there is no gap*

*between their progress and that of their non-disadvantaged peers. (Extract from Field Notes)*

Government-led prioritizing of particular pupils' needs has meant that at Kite Hill, in keeping with most Secondary schools, we continuously try to understand how the various identified groups are progressing. As described in the 2016 OFSTED Inspection Handbook, the achievement of these groups of pupils is something that inspectors will be scrutinizing.

Inspectors will evaluate evidence relating to the achievement of specific groups of pupils and individuals, including disadvantaged pupils, the most able pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. They will give specific attention to the quality of learning within mainstream lessons and evidence of learning in off-site alternative provision. (OFSTED School Inspection Handbook, 2016: 20)

At the same time we try to ensure that the other pupils, i.e. those who do not have membership of these 'official' groups, are also doing well; the aim is for all learners to be happy, safe and healthy, attend every day, involve themselves in the life of the school, be well-prepared for the high-stakes public examinations and suitably informed about the next stage of their education. Personalising the learning of the pupils by adapting and shaping what is offered in and outside the classroom can be seen as an effective way of trying to ensure that all learners have a positive experience of school and make good progress. However, there has been some discussion at Kite Hill about whether this attempt to carve out individual arrangements for pupils is entirely practical, or indeed, something that is actually beneficial for them.

Many of the interviewed teachers felt that the official discourses around individualising teaching were problematic in their day-to-day practice. As one of them commented, it may not always be desirable for pupils to have their learning adapted and fashioned around their preferred arrangements. She observed that:

... in an ideal world, each student would have the opportunities to learn in a way that suited them entirely ... but I'm not sure if that would be a

good thing because they'd be very much locked into that certain way ... and that would be their expectation all of the time and that's not the real world either and I don't think that would be a helpful thing, broadly speaking, for a learner. (Teacher E.L.)

She also likened this to a time a few years ago when it was common practice for pupils to be given a test to determine their preferred learning style. This meant that some learners began to think that particular classroom activities were unsuitable for them because of a perceived incompatibility with their learning style. The teacher said:

... we tested them and they knew what they were and then they say, "Well, I can't do this, I'm a visual learner" ... and I think if any individual only ever worked to their strengths, where would any of us ever be? (Teacher E.L.)

This teacher maintained that although she was committed to meeting the needs of all her pupils, she felt uneasy about whether it would be a good idea for every learner to have all the teaching structured in exactly the way she or he wanted it.

You know, you have to challenge yourself sometimes and, you know, you want to improve your other areas as well, and teams work together, they're not all the same and, um, I think like anything, there's a balance. (Teacher of E.L.)

In trying to ensure that all pupils receive the right amount of challenge and support, extension work is often given to those who have finished a particular task and who need something else to do. This technique, which sits within the pedagogy of differentiation, is generally seen as an effective way to further extend the learning of those pupils deemed 'more able', who appear to need to more challenging work to supplement the main classroom activities. When teachers are asked about how they differentiate for their mixed-ability classes, extension work is often mentioned. It might seem, on the face of it, a reasonably logical and unproblematic way to try and meet the needs of those pupils who complete work quickly and accurately and might, without something else to occupy them, be 'twiddling their thumbs'.

However, as noted by one of the teacher participants in the Kite Hill study, not all pupils want extra work and will often find an excuse not to do it.

... I don't really like to give them more writing, um, you know, and that just seems like more work to them and they don't necessarily want to do it, so they don't want to get on to that activity anyway, so unless it's something they want to do, they are just going to say they are not finished yet. (Teacher U.I.)

### **The challenges of defining pupils' needs**

Thinking about human needs, in general, it could be said that to try and work out what even one's own needs might be is not always straightforward and to consider undertaking such a thing for someone else is fraught with difficulty. And yet, this is something schools are undertaking on a daily basis with the real possibility that pupils' needs could be misunderstood, and, with a word borrowed from the medical world – misdiagnosed – with the result that inappropriate adaptations and/or interventions are implemented. There are also complex challenges in terms of schools trying to make provision for particular pupils and their perceived needs at the same time as trying to ensure that other groups do not miss out. It is also possible that by prioritizing some pupils' needs, other learners may become oppressed in the sense that their needs fall so far down the school's priorities, that they are left without access to the means to succeed. In short, the focus on some pupils may mean the neglect of others, which is, in Young's (1990) terms, a form of oppression. For example, when schools are struggling to move up the league tables, they will put more resources and effort into raising the attainment of pupils whose performance is just under the point which is counted, which was, until recently, those with 'D' grades who might be lifted up to gain 'C' grades. Pupils who are performing at a 'G' level (the lowest of the GCSE grades) would have been unlikely to receive as much assistance to improve their attainment in a corresponding way. This scenario could also be seen as a form of marginalization, which is one of Young's (1990) five 'faces' of oppression; not simply a matter of aggressors

and victims, but the building of systems and structures that, even though well intended, can exclude and disadvantage. She states that

... oppression also refers to systematic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequence of following those rules. (Young, 1990: 41)

Resources such as time, energy and money are, in any school, limited. Whilst policy makers advocate that teachers should meet pupils' needs and the teachers themselves are working to make their lessons accessible to all, what is never mentioned in official documentation is the problem shaped like the large, grey trunked animal whose presence in the room reminds us that whilst trying to meet the needs of some individual pupils or groups of pupils, we might be in grave danger of neglecting others whose needs are more difficult to see or which lie outside of the latest official categories.

We have already seen in this chapter how school regulatory bodies, such as OFSTED, currently promote the measurement of pupil progress by group, such as those deemed to have Low Prior Attainment. White (1990) reminds us that the British education system has, for some time, been a driver of a type of separatism, promoting activities that focus on the individual pupil rather than those that encourage them to work collegiately and co-operatively. The divisions are harsh and position stakeholders where there are only two real possibilities – advantaging one group or advantaging another. White explains it like this:

Separatism is a powerful influence in contemporary British education. It turns us away from co-operative activities, from character education and from intimate attachments, towards ends where answers to the question 'whose well-being is being promoted?' divide neatly into self-regarding and other-regarding. (ibid.: 67)

In schools difficulties arise in terms of trying to work out how the needs of particular groups of pupils can be put first without other learners missing out. Cribb and Gewirtz (2005) noted that in the case of a school being tasked with raising the attainment of a particular ethnic group, tensions arose between carrying out this important work whilst, at the same time, ensuring that all other students' interests were not neglected. They also note the challenge of using categorisation to try and tackle previous inequalities, but to then ensure that this process, necessary to try and bring about improved educational experiences for a particular group, did not, in itself, contribute to the very problems it was trying to conquer. In the next section we will look in more detail at the approach to meeting pupils' needs through categorised groupings.

### **Categorising and labelling**

Looking at examples of how categorisation can bring unexpected challenges to a school, a study by Koshy and Pinheiro-Torres (2013) considered some of the teachers' and pupils' experiences when Labour's Gifted and Talented policy was introduced in 1999. The requirement placed on schools was to identify a cohort of children deemed to be gifted and talented, but as is the case with many policy driven initiatives, there was little evidence in terms of thorough research, that by highlighting the difference between children who were deemed gifted and talented and those who were not, a better educational experience could be provided for either group. Koshy and Pinheiro-Torres make the further point that schools are often left in a type of implementation limbo when Government initiatives are unexpectedly withdrawn. This was the case with the Gifted and Talented policy, which was abandoned in 2011. The publication of its demise in a newspaper led a pupil to ask of his teacher, 'Are we being de-gifted, Miss?' (ibid.: 953). This suggests that the categorization had been successful only in linking the recently labelled gifted and talented children to the name of the initiative.

Evans et al. (2015) describe how labelling in schools can be iatrogenic, a description usually applied to the situation of patients who, in doing what

their medical practitioner has told them to do, find that their condition becomes worse. In schools, we see a similar situation in the sense of strategies designed to improve outcomes for particular learners whereby they are ascribed to have membership of a group, for example, of learners with English as a Second Language. What can then ensue is that, as a member of that group, negative experiences can occur such as feeling stigmatised. More about this will be discussed in Chapter 6 as we look at pupils' experiences of being offered additional help outside of the normal teaching time.

### **Special Educational Needs and Inclusion**

One of the most significant ways that schools try to personalise their provision is through the work they undertake to support learners who are believed to have a defined set of additional needs. This could range from a pupil with a physical disability to one who has particular learning or behavioural needs. Since moving from the days of remedial education, the provision for these learners has been under the umbrella of Special Educational Needs, often referred to as SEN. Until recently, parents who felt that their child had a high level of educational need, could apply to the Local Authority for a Statement of Special Needs, which would entitle the child's school to receive extra money to be spent on additional support, often in the form of the employment of a Teaching Assistant to help the child in and, in some cases, outside of the classroom too. Since the passing of the 2014 Children and Families Act, these arrangements have undergone a reconceptualization of how parents of a child with additional needs will receive support. The 'Statement of SEN' is now called an 'Education, Health and Care Plan' and is said to be structured so as to give parents more say in the total provision for their child. These new arrangements are also claimed to be at the forefront of a more personalised delivery of SEN support in England's schools. Looking at the 2015 Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice, the point is made that these new arrangements will mean that:

There is a clearer focus on the participation of children and young people and parents in decision making at individual and strategic levels. (ibid.: 14)

Whether, in practice this will be the case, we have yet to discover.

The phrase 'special educational needs' often brings with it associations of a particular type of learner and it is difficult to imagine how such a need would not, in one form or another, evoke the idea of the pupil having some area of difficulty with her or his learning. Barr (1995) reminds us that language does not simply represent a fixed and immovable reality, but that what we say and what we think are so intertwined that the words and the things they describe each gain meaning from the other. She also explains that what we believe to be our personal characteristics, such as kindness or friendliness, only exist in terms of our relationships with each other and would soon become irrelevant should we find ourselves marooned on an uninhabited island. It might also be the case that the concept of special educational needs exists only in the sense of it being attached to a learner in an educational setting and it is certainly the case that the state of having a special educational need exists only in the sense other pupils do not.

Even if schools work hard to be inclusive institutions and welcoming to all learners, the question still remains as to whether the labelling of some pupils as having special educational needs is in harmony with this aspiration or whether, in spite of the very best of intentions, some learners in this group are made to feel more different than they would like. It is not unusual for parents to ask me, as Headteacher, what it is we are going to be able to do for their daughter in terms of meeting her special needs. Quite often this request will be joined by another and that is, whatever we have in mind for the child, would we please ensure that we do not single her out and make her feel different. In this sense, an almost impossible conundrum is ahead of us as illustrated by the following extract from my Field Notes:

*I spoke to a Head who works in a nearby school. He told me about a letter he had recently received from a mother regarding her son's learning difficulties.*



*In the letter, there was a lot of information about the things she thought the school should be doing to help the child make better progress. One of the things was the use of blue ink on cream paper, for all worksheets. The final part of the letter was a plea for the teachers to avoid making the child look different in front of his classmates. I reflected that it would be difficult for the school to use the coloured ink/cream paper combo for the whole class, given that this would make worksheets much more expensive (and ultimately, unaffordable) to produce. The alternative would be to use the coloured ink and cream paper for the child in question, but how, then, would the teachers manage to routinely distribute these different-looking sheets without any of the other pupils noticing? It is as if we are trying to achieve differentiation without the difference, I said to my colleague. (Extract from Field Notes)*

Prospective parents will also sometimes tell me, almost within minutes of arriving at the school, about their daughter's special need and it strikes me that the dyslexia, the ADHD or whatever the need may be, has become almost the main defining characteristic of their child.

Feiler and Gibson (1999) maintain that the labelling of a child's particular needs, far from promoting inclusive schooling for all, can instead result in making inclusion more difficult. They argue that labelling and categorising in schools have had such a long shelf life because, as least in part, they provide an explanation for a child's difficulties that is easier to stomach than the alternative, which is to take into account more unpalatable possible reasons for the learning difficulty, such as the child having had poor teaching, insufficient parental support or inadequate resources.

Returning to Burr's (1995) desert island, it is worth considering, I think, that what we term, 'learning difficulties' such as dyslexia would no longer be relevant in such a setting; the need for literacy skills would be rapidly replaced by those of survival – shelter making, food gathering and the like. Whilst the labelling of a group of learners as having special educational needs was seen primarily as a way to ensure that they did not get overlooked, what seems to have happened is that we sometimes find it hard

to see past the special need label and remind ourselves that underneath there is a learner with a vast range of hopes, fears, talents, aptitudes, likes and dislikes. In other words someone just like anyone else.

Inclusive education is a phrase that is generally accepted to describe a positive approach in that it works to ensure all young people have equality of opportunity in their schooling and then go on to make a significant contribution to a fairer, more equitable society. As succinctly explained by Burton

Inclusive education is part of a human rights approach to social relations and conditions. The intentions and values involved are an integral part of a vision of the whole society of which education is a part. Therefore, the role education plays in the development of an inclusive society is a very serious issue. Burton (2006: 234)

Whilst no one, I think, would disagree that inclusivity is a good thing, there are however, some accompanying issues that need consideration. For example, suggesting that education should be inclusive brings to bear the possibility that without some sort of action, it might become exclusive. The question then follows as to who might be at risk of exclusion, what might be happening to them and why. Given that the phrase is so often used within the context of special educational needs, it has become almost unquestioningly accepted that it will be the learners with special needs who are most at risk of being excluded. It could be the case, however, that any learner can be at risk of being and/or feeling excluded and it could also come to pass that strategies developed to include the needs of one group of pupils work to exclude others. It is also quite common to hear the phrase 'barriers to learning', and once again, it is thought that pupils with special needs are most likely to experience these barriers. With over thirty years' teaching experience in seven different schools, I can confidently say that barriers to learning are something any pupil can come up against at any time.

To try and personalise education by categorising some learners as having special needs is, I think, in need of serious re-consideration. Perhaps only by removing the labels and reminding ourselves that all learners have needs, can we be truly inclusive (see, for example, Skidmore (1996), Ho (2004) and Hodgkinson (2012)). Perhaps in the same way that we look, with a degree of incredulity, at how children in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could be categorised as ‘idiots’ and ‘imbeciles’ (Abbot, 2011), perhaps in the years to come, we will recall how mistaken we were to refer to learners as ‘dyslexic’ or as having ‘oppositional defiance disorder.’

In the next section we will look at how the use of Teaching Assistants, (a common approach in schools to support pupils with SEN) changes some of the experiences of both pupils and teachers.

### **Teaching Assistants – the pupil and teacher perspective**

For the pupil interviewees, the most noticeable aspect of being someone with special educational needs was the presence of a Teaching Assistant in lessons. One of the Year 12 pupils held strong opinions about how this form of personalised support should be given and was concerned that, at times, the Teaching Assistants appeared to be giving a girl so much help as to be depriving her of the opportunity to work at something herself. She said:

... there were a few times in a lesson where one of the girls would do the work, but the TA sort of did a bit too much for her, I would notice and I just thought, ‘You’re not really giving her the opportunity to do it.’

The same pupil thought that a much better approach had been adopted by one of her friend’s Teaching Assistants whereby:

... the TA would wait until she said, sort of, ‘I need help’, but she would get on with it to the best of her abilities and then she would ask for help ... . (Ellesse, Year 12)

It was also noted by one of the Teacher interviewees that the role of TA needs to be one that supports the learner and encourages independence. In her view,

...the TA has to support them and help them to  
become independent learners rather than, you know,  
becoming this person that they must rely on at all times.  
(Teacher A.U.)

It has been argued by some researchers that pupils whose Statement of Special Needs/ Education, Health and Care Plan, provides them with a Teaching Assistant changes their school experience in a way that does not assist them to access the curriculum, but instead impoverishes the education they receive. The personalisation that occurs is, therefore, not a positive, enabling process, but one of restriction and reduction. For example, a study by Webster and Blatchford (2014) highlighted the extent to which pupils, who were assigned a TA, were often not so much assisted but taught by that person. This led to a diminished educational experience for these pupils together with a subtle but tangible partitioning from the other learners in terms of the tasks they were given to do and the reduced amount of teacher attention they received. Although Webster and Blatchford's research was undertaken in a Primary School setting, there are, nonetheless, elements of their findings echoed in the Kite Hill study. One of the pupil interviewees described how the provision of someone to help her in the classroom when she first started at Kite Hill, had made her feel awkward and had changed her timetable in that she was also required to miss a lesson to access intensive English language help. She said:

It kind of took away – 'cos I missed a lesson and I didn't feel like she was helping – I felt quite, um, embarrassed for some reason in, um, the classroom when I had her because sometimes the classroom was quite small and she'd have to fit on the side and she'd tell me to put my hand up and it got kind of – I got kind of panicky. (Sakinah, Year 12)

What has become a well-established mechanism to provide additional, personalised support, i.e. the provision of an adult to help children in situ, is seen here as a source of stress and embarrassment. Some of the Kite Hill teachers also spoke of how difficult some girls found the support of a TA in

the classroom. One interviewee recalled how a pupil she taught had shown such aversion to this arrangement that a different approach became necessary. She said:

I have had a girl who would not let a TA near her because she didn't want the others knowing, so we had to be very subtle and usually I would perform the role of the TA and once I'd sort of delivered the lesson, I would then go round and sit with some of the other girls and then end up with the weaker girl so that it wasn't very obvious, because otherwise, she, you know, would get very upset if a TA tried to sit next to her. (Teacher A.U.)

This teacher went on to describe how, for some learners, the prospect of having a 'helper' sitting down next to them in lessons was such a strong and public exposure of weakness that it would cause them to become completely disengaged. She said:

... they don't want others in the class to see them as weak. ... you do have to take into account how they feel, because otherwise some girls will dig their heels in and just – they'll just shut down and, you know, they would rather not do the work than others see that they're maybe not as clever. (Teacher A.U.)

How much learners believe in their own capacity to make progress was the focus of a study by Zimmerman et al. where it became clear that the learners' belief or lack of belief in themselves impacted on several aspects of their educational experience and success, especially in terms of sustaining effort and motivation. It was noted that:

... self-regulation of motivation depends on self-efficacy beliefs as well as on personal goals. Perceived self-efficacy influences the level of goal challenge people set for themselves, the amount of effort they mobilize and their persistence in the face of difficulties. (Zimmerman et al., 1992: 664)

For pupils who have been assigned a Teaching Assistant, the very presence of that person in their classrooms may influence their self-belief in such a negative way, that far from this strategy being supportive, it becomes a significant contributor to the learner losing confidence and being unable to

put in the required effort. Holt (1967) makes the very valid point that unasked for help can be seriously disabling for all children, not just those with additional needs. He offers us a scenario that, although taken from a series of observations of very young children, is nonetheless relevant to the teaching of older pupils. When, as adults, we intervene and offer help before it has been asked for, we risk conveying the unspoken premise that we lack faith in the child and take from them the challenge that is rightfully theirs.

He offers this vignette by way of illustrating the point:

A mother came into the office with her eighteen month-old daughter. While the mother looked over our books to see what she wanted to buy, the little one explored the office. Finally the mother had the four books she wanted, which the little girl had asked to carry. But the books were slippery, and one of them kept sliding on the ground. This began to frustrate and irritate the child. Seeing that she clearly did not *like* having the books fall on the floor, I thought I might help by putting a rubber band around them... . She looked at it a second, saw it was indeed holding the books together, and then burst into furious tears. Fortunately, from many years of being with little children, I could see what was the matter. She saw me putting the rubber bands around the books as a comment on the fact that she could not hold them together. She was right and she was offended. To her, it was as if I had said, "You're so clumsy that you'll never be able to carry these books unless I put the rubber band on." Naturally, this made her ashamed and angry. Understanding the trouble, I could easily set things right. I said, "I'm sorry, I'll take the rubber band off," and did so. Instantly she stopped crying and was as happy as she had been before. She still had to struggle with the books. But it was *her* struggle. (Holt, 1967: 118)

The personalisation of education for learners with special educational needs continues to be a contested area; competing ideologies and practices may cause the advantaging or disadvantaging of individual pupils or groups even within what might be termed an inclusive setting. As noted by Feiler and Gibson (1999), one of the challenges to combatting the exclusion or marginalisation of some groups of learners is the absence of a clear and precise definition of inclusion. If personalisation is really to mean the best provision possible for each pupil, then it is perhaps worth considering

whether what effectively becomes a division of pupils into two groups, those with special educational needs and those without, is indeed the best way to do it.

## **Conclusion**

A significant element of personalised learning lies in the initial definition of pupils' needs. There are, however, major challenges and tensions in terms of how pupils' needs are defined and how they are then met. Official definitions of the needs of individual or groups of pupils, such as those emanating from OFSTED, and communicated through inspection reports, seem often to carry the most weight, with other views, those, for example, of the teachers, sidelined. There is also a serious and significant risk that the diagnosis of need will be faulty and/or cause some groups and individuals to lose out altogether.

The identification of some pupils as having a specific need, as in the case of those deemed to have Special Educational Needs, can lead to a feeling, sometimes experienced by the learners themselves, of a label having been assigned to them. This is something that can serve as a positive facilitator of additional support but can also bring about unwelcome and often unintended consequences such as provision that marks the recipient out as someone who lacks capability.

The work that teachers undertake to try and meet their pupils' needs, however they may come to be identified, is demanding and complex. The pressure to ensure all learners make expected or better than expected progress is currently immense as is the increasing expectation that resources, tasks, assessments and questions will be shaped and adjusted to fit each individual. This challenging agenda, which gives rise to tensions that are analogous to those discussed in this chapter, is explored in the next.

## **Chapter Four                      Differentiation and Educational Dosing**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will look at classroom practices that serve to shape the curriculum and its delivery to try to ensure that all pupils, in every class, are able to make good progress.

The idea that teachers should adapt their pedagogical practice in the classroom is nothing new. Over 40 years ago, a large project, which came to be known as the Plowden Report stated that:

Teachers will have to adapt their teaching methods to individuals within a class or school. Only in this way can the needs of gifted and slow learning children and all those between the extremes be met.  
(Central Advisory Council for Education 1967: 460)

It is also clear from the current Teachers' Standards that the expectation is for teachers to make adaptations to their teaching so as to be able to meet the needs of all their pupils. These Standards are published by the Department of Education and serve to make publicly available what is expected in terms of teachers' professional practice. Standard 5 explains that the teacher must be able to:

Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils.

More detail is provided in the form of bullet points, stating that the teacher should:

- know when and how to differentiate appropriately, using approaches which enable pupils to be taught effectively
- have a secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit pupils' ability to learn, and how best to overcome these
- demonstrate an awareness of the physical, social and intellectual development of children, and know how to adapt teaching to support pupils' education at different stages of development
- have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs; those of high ability; those with English as a second language; those with disabilities; and be able to



use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them. (Teachers Standards, DfE, 2014)

In this chapter we will look at various aspects of teaching and learning, especially those focusing on classroom practices where activities and resources are adapted to try and ensure that all pupils can access the work and make good progress. The relationship between differentiation and the construction of pupils' identities and self-worth will also be explored.

### **The pedagogical technique of differentiation**

To try and personalise the learning of pupils, without dividing them into ability groups and teaching them in different rooms, is something teachers aim to do by means of a pedagogical technique known as 'differentiation'. Questions, tasks, worksheets and homework can all be set at different levels and given to pupils as a way of meeting their perceived needs. This might mean, for example, a teacher preparing two versions of a particular worksheet and giving it out to those pupils she/he thinks might benefit from an easier or harder level of work. The idea behind this practice is that the whole class is studying the same topic at the same time, but pupils are neither under nor over-challenged. Whilst this approach might appear unproblematic and perhaps a reasonably effective way to meet different pupil needs, the reality is that, the distribution of worksheets that look either easier or more complicated, is not a neutral activity and can impact on how pupils begin to construct their identity as either competent learners or those in whom the teacher has less faith.

The adaptation of work for learners in any one class, referred to as 'differentiation by task' is often seen as a better way to meet a variety of pupil needs than the alternative method of differentiation, which is known as 'differentiation by outcome' whereby the tasks are the same for all learners, but it is acknowledged that pupils will make different rates of progress. Sometimes referred to colloquially as a 'cop-out', critics can be quite outspoken as to the unsuitability of this approach for many learners. As noted by Abbot

In too many cases teachers use the strategy of differentiation by outcome; at its simplest level this means that one task is given to all students so that some of them produce a range of responses while others struggle to produce anything at all. (Abbot, 2011: 242)

He goes on to explain that:

A more appropriate strategy involves differentiation by task; a careful teacher will allow for a range of tasks to be offered. (ibid.)

Why the passive voice was chosen here I am unsure, and perhaps in classrooms visited by the author, this range of tasks does magically present itself by permission of the teacher, but the Kite Hill interviewees were in no doubt that the offering of a range of differentiated tasks was a huge undertaking for which a lot of time had to be set aside in order to do the necessary preparation. As explained by one of them:

I had a Year 10 class and there was one girl in particular ... she really needed that extra help ... so you'd give her all the answers, but they were all in the wrong order so she still had to listen to pieces of information and then work it out herself, but without that, she wouldn't have coped. And then you can also differentiate it by saying, um, if you want to answer in English, pick up the French or the German and then, if you are not confident in the target language, put it in English. So even doing the simplest of tasks, if you do it well, just preparing one listening activity, which will take, like, maybe 4 minutes, could take maybe half an hour, 40 minutes to prepare when you are typing up answers and printing off transcripts and things ... I mean, if you do it really, really well, and as well as you'd really like to do it, it could take you literally 3 hours, I think, if you do it properly, to prepare one lesson, if you actually do all these extra resources for all the pupils ... . (Teacher L.R.)

It is clear, I think, from this detailed answer that planning all the activities that any one class might undertake in a typical hour-long lesson and then adapting even some of them so that they are accessible to all learners, is a massive enterprise. Also, it needs to be noted that secondary school teachers

do not teach just one class. The average main scale colleague may have as many as 12, in each of which there might be up to 32 pupils. Out of a possible 50 lessons a fortnight, the average teacher will have 42 teaching periods and be responsible for the progress of over 250 pupils. Using the example of a real, main scale History teacher at Kite Hill, he has 2 Year 7 classes, 2 Year 8, 3 Year 9, 1 Year 10, 1 Year 11, 1 Year 12 and 1 Year 13. In total this gives 263 pupils for whom he will prepare lessons, teach, mark their work, write reports, communicate and meet with their parents, as well as offering help and support outside of formal teaching time. In this context the agenda of differentiation and personalisation looks daunting.

### **The learners' and the teachers' perspective**

Looking at differentiation from the perspective of a learner, the Kite Hill pupils were asked if they had had experience of lessons where different levels of worksheets were used. Several spoke of their sense of disappointment if they were the ones receiving what appeared to be work set at a lower level.

... if you got the easy worksheet you might feel a bit patronised that you didn't get the sort of harder one, that you – the teachers didn't think you were up to that standard... (India, Year 13)

Some felt that those who were not given the more complex worksheets were being denied access to higher levels of attainment. A Year 13 pupil noted what she felt was a loss of opportunity and said:

I think the ones with the simpler worksheets might feel that they don't have the opportunity to have a go at the harder things and, um, yeah – I think some of them would say that it wasn't fair because they wouldn't be able to access the, sort of, higher levels if they wanted to. (Karly, Year 13)

The Kite Hill teachers, however, did not see the giving of easier work as an exclusionary practice, i.e. something that might hinder achievement, but as a way of ensuring that pupils did not find themselves in a situation where they were unable to do the tasks given to them. As explained by one of the interviewees:

... you want them to be challenged, but if the work's not accessible they'll get nothing rather than something... . (Teacher E.L.)

Other comments from the interviewed teachers reflected the difficulties of giving out worksheets at different levels in that they could see how some pupils reacted badly to receiving what would appear to something easier.

... when I first started teaching, I was doing the whole, "these sheets are for you, this one's for you", and you could kind of see them going – kind of shudder away from the sheet a little bit... . (Teacher I.H.)

These difficulties contributed to the teachers taking quite elaborate measures to try and disguise the fact that easier work was being given to some pupils. One of the interviewees demonstrated how she would hide the worksheets inside a large book so that, as she moved around the classroom, it was more difficult for pupils to see who was getting which sheet. Another teacher said that she would try to arrive at the classroom before the pupils and put the work out so that they could not see what other people were being given. She empathized very strongly with her learners, saying:

... I would hate to be given, kind of, a sheet and gone, "This is your sheet", because then everyone knows you are different" ... .

She then went on to describe what she did to help a pupil with a disability not to feel any different to others:

... so, for example, last year, I taught another partially blind student and she has to have all her work enlarged, so before the lesson I would put the sheet in where she sat, sort of thing, so when I was handing them out it just looked like she was getting kind of the regular sheet ... . (Teacher I.H.)

Several teachers tried to make the different levels of worksheet all look the same so as to protect their pupils from having what they saw as the upsetting experience of being seen as someone in need of easier work. It was also quite common for teachers to give all pupils both an easier and a more difficult worksheet in the hope that if someone gets stuck on the more

difficult level, they could revert to the easier one. However, that approach did not entirely solve the problem in that some pupils would do the easier worksheet even though they could have confidently undertaken the harder one. As described by one teacher:

... the middle ability, let's say, want the easier worksheet because they think it's easy... (Teacher E.L.)

The same teacher also acknowledged that even being very careful to try and disguise how the different levels of worksheet were being distributed amongst the class, the pupils still managed to figure out who was getting the easier or more difficult work.

... you know, you try to be as inconspicuous as you can, but it just doesn't – nothing passes the students, they are observant, so they know who's getting what worksheet and ... the whole class is probably aware of who are the students who need a bit of extra help ... (Teacher E.L.)

In spite of GCSE examination passes being graded A\*- G (until 2019 when this will have been entirely replaced by a new numeric system), there is so much rhetoric and media attention given to the importance of pupils gaining a C or above, it is hardly surprising that those who are working at a lower level can experience a sense of inadequacy. Once a pupil begins to see herself as in some way, not 'up to it', classroom procedures, such as the use of work at different levels, serve to exacerbate that feeling rather than, what they were originally designed to do, i.e. to support all pupils and help everyone make good progress.

As another teacher explained, the giving of two sheets, to all pupils, at two different levels was not entirely problem-free. Some girls associated the use of what the teacher described as the 'support sheet' as being something they did not want to be seen doing.

... there would be a sheet that would support what was there ... and now and again you'd see one or two sneakily picking up the sheet ... (Teacher U.I.)

It would seem that in this situation, such was the stigma of being seen as needing support, that the use of the additional sheet became, for some

pupils, something that had to be done furtively and without others seeing.

The same teacher also described how girls would,

... deliberately try and do the stuff that's too difficult, because they don't want to be seen doing something that's easier.

This response by pupils to a situation where they could choose either tasks they could comfortably manage or ones that were possibly inaccessible - and saw them go for the latter - is a good example of a failure avoidance strategy, which, as described by Seifert, is not something that pupils do to avoid failure but to protect themselves from possible negative perceptions by others. He explains that:

A failure avoiding strategy is *not* (original italics), as the name suggests, a strategy to avoid failure. Rather, it is a strategy to avoid the *implication* (original italics) of failure, namely inability. (Seifert, 2004: 141)

In the scenario described by teacher U.I., some pupils avoided using the easier worksheets because they did not want to be seen as learners who lacked the ability to do the more difficult ones. The lure of the success culture, defined by high grades and places in top sets, is so strong as to make potential identification with low performing individuals, highly unattractive. As explained by Covington, in his description of self-worth theory, a person's belief in herself or himself is intrinsically connected to how successful they perceive themselves to be. He states that:

... because ability is seen as a critical component of success, and inability a prime cause of failure, self-perceptions of ability become a significant part of one's self-definition. Individuals are driven to succeed not only to reap the personal and social benefits of success, but also because success aggrandizes a reputation for one's ability to achieve; and if success becomes unlikely, one's first priority is to act in ways that minimize the implications of failure - namely that one lacks ability. (Covington, 1984: 8)

Teachers, when asked to define what they understand by 'differentiation', will often describe it as a process whereby different pupil needs can be met. However, during the course of some of the teacher interviews, it became

apparent that the practice had become more about the adaptation of work so that it was easier and could therefore be undertaken by pupils who were deemed to need something more straightforward. There was, for example, the regular work (that most of the children would be able to do) and the differentiated work aimed at those who might struggle. This binary approach was picked up by one of the pupils who expressed dismay when she was given what the teacher referred to as a 'differentiated' worksheet (rather than an 'easier' one`), but which the pupil did not appreciate. As explained by one of the teacher interviewees,

I had it one time last year, a girl ... she was SEN for literacy, so I gave her a differentiated worksheet and she was, "Oh why?" (Teacher H.O.)

Another teacher described a similar pupil response, which indicated how unhappy she was in being offered an extra sheet in class, one that was designed to be helpful to anyone who looked like they might be struggling.

... this girl was like – she actually confronted me ... and she did say, you know, 'Why did you single me out', and I thought, O.K., maybe I didn't handle that as well as I could have, but I think you've got to be incredibly sensitive and just say, ' Look, you probably don't need it (a help sheet), but it's here if you want it '... . (Teacher L.R.)

In addition to pupils sometimes showing their disappointment and displeasure at being given worksheets, help-sheets or other materials that had a negative impact on their sense of being competent learners, parents too sometimes share their views about 'easier-looking' schoolwork, as illustrated by the following extract from my Field Notes.

*At our weekly Staff Briefing, our Head of Year 7 says that a mother has written in to say that she does not want her daughter to be given differentiated work. The pupil has noticed that some of the worksheets she has been given look different and it is making her unhappy. After the meeting, teachers say that the child is struggling and that they had been differentiating the work so that*

*she could get on and complete the tasks at the same pace as her friends.*

*(Extract from Field Notes)*

### **Difference as deficit**

What seems to be emerging is a type of deficit model whereby pupils who make good progress are given the work that reflects the main content of the lesson and the pupils who cannot do that are given simpler tasks, often referred to as differentiated work, or additional resources such as help-sheets. Another teacher further developed the idea of 'can' and 'cannot' and expressed the view that some pupils need support structures such as writing frames because:

... they can't access the language that you'd normally use ... (Teacher E.L.)

The use of 'normally' seems almost to pathologize the apparent inability of some pupils to understand a particular type of language. She went on to say that,

... if you're talking about something that they've never heard of before and they simply can't work out what it is, then they've lost the whole lesson and they just haven't a clue what's going on so, um, there's -and they can - you know, it could be, uh, a numeracy issue or a literacy issue, or, um, their processing ... (Teacher E.L.)

The differences between the pupils are seen here almost as a type of problem, or 'issue' to be dealt with, the consequences of which so serious as to render an entire lesson inaccessible to the learners who were unable to understand the new material.

To pathologize difference, i.e. to see it as something that must be remedied and rectified emerges as a troubling theme in schools today, enacted by teachers and pupils at least in part it would seem, as a consequence of the rigid focus on prescribed outcomes as handed down to schools by the policy makers. As described by Hamilton (1998) the situation is one that can be



likened to a type of sickness that has inflicted schools in the UK whereby what is perceived as wrong must be 'cured'.

Teachers who are currently under a great deal of pressure to raise standards and to ensure all learners meet their targets may well come to see pupil differences in the light of two divisions: pupils who can access and complete the work and pupils who have problems that need to be overcome because they cannot do the work. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, we can see an emergence of a position whereby pupils are 'othered' by some of the school procedures and processes. Gillborn makes the point that once a type of 'norm' becomes established, others are then seen as different and set apart. He uses the example of 'whiteness' as the norm and describes it like this:

... whiteness draws much of its power from "Othering" the very idea of ethnicity. A central characteristic of whiteness is a process of 'naturalization' such that white becomes the norm from which other 'races' stand apart and in relation to which they are defined. (Gillborn, 2009:46)

In the classroom, where teachers are trying to differentiate the tasks and the questions, the 'norm' becomes the pupil who the teacher believes can do the work planned for the class and those who are likely to struggle comparatively defined.

Whilst teachers may want to embrace diversity and give all their learners equal opportunities, the pressure to arrive at a particular outcome, such as a government prescribed percentage of pupils achieving 5+ GCSE grades A\*-C, can begin to chip away at these values and a situation can be arrived at where, '... difference gets configured as deficit' (Benjamin et al. 2003: 552).

## **Questioning**

Another way that teachers try to ensure all pupils are challenged and supported in lessons is by the use of questioning. What is currently described as good pedagogical practice is for the teacher to take into

account the progress of the pupils, together with information held in the school about each one, and structure the questions accordingly, seeking more straightforward answers from those who are working at a lower level and asking more complex things of the learners who have made most progress. Also, it may be the case that there is a national focus on particular pupil cohorts, which, when enacted in a school setting will require additional attention to be given to that group, in and outside the classroom. Currently, teachers are particularly aware of the learners for whom the school receives the Pupil Premium (ring-fenced funding for disadvantaged learners) given that historically, these pupils do less well than their more affluent peers and that OFSTED make it clear that schools must account for the attainment of these pupils. The 'Pupil Premium - Accountability' section on the DfE website makes the following statement:

Ofsted's school inspections report on the attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils who attract the pupil premium. (Department of Education, 2017)

Some of the interviewed teachers, when asked about their approach to questioning, gave answers that mirrored the deficit scenario that others had spoken about with regard to the use of differentiated worksheets. As noted by one teacher:

... some girls simply – they don't have the vocabulary, some girls don't, um, cannot make the same cultural connections. Even though they might be white British, depending on the environment they have been brought up in, you can't assume that they have a certain amount of knowledge that many people might take for granted. (Teacher A.U.)

The use of 'same' in this statement and the idea of knowledge that might be 'taken for granted' suggests that here, differentiation is cast in terms of what might be missing from the stock of experiences and skills of certain pupils.

For the learners, it did not go unnoticed that questions asked by the teachers were not all at the same level. One of the pupil participants was particularly dismissive of the approach some teachers took, which was to ask simpler questions of some people in the class. She went on to describe

how, in her view, being asked a straightforward question indicated that the teacher did not think a great deal of her capabilities. She said:

If they ask, like, really, really straightforward and simple questions, they might feel as if, like, she doesn't think, or he doesn't think, that I can – am capable of answering harder questions ... .  
(Zaara, Year 12)

The same pupil had developed a particular response to this type of classroom interaction, a way perhaps, in which to show her displeasure at being involved in a transaction that served to cast doubt on her ability to tackle complex questions. When asked about her response to the scenario in which a teacher asked her what seemed to be a simple question, she said:

I'd probably just give a straight one, maybe two-word answer. I kind of get a bit annoyed, so I don't give them the satisfaction knowing that they've even bothered me by trying to ask me something like that.  
(Zaara, Year 12)

The idea that being asked simple or complex questions was connected to what the teacher thought about a particular pupil's capabilities was shared by another Year 12 pupil who expressed the view that:

... maybe the one who was asked the simple question will feel that they are not challenged enough or maybe the teacher doesn't believe in them as much ... . But the one who's asked the harder question will feel that the teacher has more belief in them – belief that they'll do well in the future. (Yasira, Year 12)

Another Year 12 participant held a different view of the experience of being asked what seemed to be easier questions in class and felt that perhaps pupils might not realize they were easier unless the teacher had told them beforehand. This pupil also felt it could be the case that perhaps easier questions are necessary and, indeed, helpful. She explained that:

... I think that it would be helping them in a way because they can work their way up. (Siobhan, Year 12)

Asking the 'right' questions of the pupils is certainly not a straightforward thing to accomplish. Whilst teachers told me that they try to ensure that all pupils are supported and challenged, the pupils are clearly interpreting the pedagogical practice of differentiation in ways that reach far beyond the surface classroom activities. One of the pupils explained that sometimes it was the hard questions that she was unhappy about and sometimes it was the easy ones that impacted negatively on her feelings.

... I don't like being given really difficult questions, but I don't like being given ridiculously easy ones 'cos it does make me feel a bit – oh (gesture of disappointment), but I dunno.  
(Elesse, Year 12)

Another pupil also said that it could be either the easy or the hard questions that made her uncomfortable. The easy ones made her feel that she was in some way lacking and the more complicated ones put her under pressure, especially if she was at a loss to give an answer. She said:

See, I can remember this kind of situation, I can either – being the simple question that got asked, you kind of – when the more complex question's asked you think, oh, kind of, like, was I not quite good enough for that question or even, kind of, like, when you get the hard questions you don't know how to answer it, you kind of feel under pressure and, kind of, it makes you look a lot worse because you don't know how to and it, kind of, like – the teacher is picking on you, in a stupid way as it sounds.  
(Eliza, Year 13)

One pupil, when asked about the practice of teachers asking different levels of questions to different members of the class, expressed the view that it was not based on what the teacher thought about the pupils' potential, but a technique to manage behaviour, which, she thought was not a good thing for teachers to do. She said:

... the next lesson they'll ask me questions like that or ask me really, really hard questions that obviously no-one in the class would know, but you're asking me because I wasn't paying attention last lesson, or

something like that – that’s kind of really annoying.  
(Zaara, Year 12)

Several pupils expressed the view that everyone should be given the same level of questions because both the learners getting the easy questions and those getting the harder ones will begin to see themselves in a way that is not helpful for their self-esteem. A Year 12 explained this quite vividly and said:

Um, well, I would say that the people receiving the simpler questions would feel a little, like they’re not as clever as the other – the student getting the more difficult question, um, I think – but at the same time the student getting the difficult question will probably feel like she is, um, at a higher standard of learning ... uh, is more clever or something like that ... so in a way, that can be a negative thing because they may perceive themselves as being better than the rest of the class ... maybe someone who boasts quite a lot about their grades ... so I think in general it can have quite a negative effect, so I think teachers should be asking the same level of questions to every student in the class. (Esther, Year 12)

### **Classroom practices in England and in France**

Sometimes a comparative perspective helps us to see our own practices and assumptions more clearly. My teaching of French has given me some insight into classroom practices in France and it seemed that, without probably knowing it, Esther touched upon one of the key differences between how the English education system tries to ensure equality of opportunity compared with what happens in France. In the UK, central to the delivery of teaching that is considered to be fair and equitable, is the belief that teachers need to adapt the work that is given to their pupils so that all of them are able to do it with confidence. The prospect of giving work that is too difficult would be seen by many British teachers as damaging to the pupils’ self-esteem, thus it becomes necessary to adapt and tailor the tasks so that they are as close a match as possible to the pupils’ perceived needs and level of progress. As described by one of the Kite Hill teachers, the process of differentiation is:

... making sure the teaching is exactly what they need to get them on to that next rung of the ladder,

so it's making it individual, it's tailoring it to where they are, so you kind of look at their assessments and see what it is they need to do to progress, so it's literally tailoring it to where they are ... it's bespoke learning really ... (Teacher L.R.)

French teachers, however, do not routinely adapt and modify the work for their pupils (Raveaud, 2005). The concept of differentiation is seen only in the sense of what the teacher might do to help pupils who are struggling to complete a particular task in a lesson.

Oui, je différencie le travail parce que j'avais les enfants qui disaient 'je ne sais pas, j'y arrive pas'. Alors ... je m'assieds à côté d'eux s'il le faut, et on reprend jusqu'à ce qu'ils aient compris. S'il faut expliquer trois fois, on ré-explique trois fois.'

(Yes, I differentiate work because I have children who say, 'I don't know, I can't do it. So ... I sit down beside them if they need help and we go over it until they've understood. If they need to have it explained three times, then that's what happens.) (Teacher (cours préparatoire) cited in Raveaud, 2005: 469)

This contrasts sharply with how the Kite Hill teachers saw differentiation. For them, it was not just about sitting down next to a pupil and re-explaining something they had not understood, but considering the entirety of the subject matter and how it was to be taught. As described by one of the teacher interviewees,

... it's kind of about making the learning – and adjusting it so that it fits every single pupil and it's unique to them, um and trying to teach in a way to get the best learning out of the pupil ... (Teacher I.H.)

with another stating that one should try to

... target every single individual child and do something for every single girl... (Teacher U.I.)

The words 'individual', 'every' and the repetition of 'single' serves here to highlight how teachers might begin to see education not so much as a communal activity, but something that needs to be shaped, changed and adapted to fit each individual learner.

Another participant imagined teaching and learning that was even more personalised and described a scenario where,

... every single student would have their own curriculum and lessons tailored just for them and a textbook just for them and lessons just for them and questions just for them. (Teacher H.O.)

The difference between how teachers in England and France see their roles reflects the history and cultural contexts of the two countries. The republican ideas of equality have helped form the French view of education as a right to which all pupils should be entitled to receive in the same amounts. In England, there was a move away from streaming and setting towards mixed ability teaching and there have been numerous attempts by policy makers to close the gap between children who make good progress at school and children who do not. This has had the effect of shaping educational provision so that high levels of personalisation and differentiation are thought to be a means to ensure every child has whatever is deemed necessary, in terms of adjustments and adaptations, for their perceived needs. Teachers are producing different levels of classroom tasks and asking questions of varying complexity, all targeted at learners whose different needs, it is believed, require this to be done. As a result, there is the risk that some pupils will begin to construct self-images that are unhelpful in terms of their confidence and capacity to make good progress. There is also a risk that some will receive a reduced curriculum with a commensurate reduction in life chances. This is what I will look at next.

### **Educational dosing**

In this section we will consider how education can become 'dosed', through the implementation of top-down policies that lead to different levels of work being given to different pupils not because of their interests or ambitions, but primarily in response to 'officially' defined characteristics of individuals and cohorts of learners.

Since the introduction of externally set GCSE targets, we have seen an increase in the stratification of the taught skills and knowledge needed in order to achieve particular grades. This practice was described by one of the pupil participants interviewed for my King's Institution Focussed Study, as shown in the following extract:

Some of my friends who have quite low targets, who want to get higher – sometimes the teachers don't sort of tell them, like, the extra bits that they have to put in.  
(Siobhan, Year 11, cited in Ceska, 2013: 32)

This pupil had clearly become aware that some of her peers with low GCSE target grades were being taught less of the subject matter than those with the higher target grades.

It can also be the case that education becomes 'dosed' through the mechanism whereby teachers decide which level GCSE paper to enter the pupils for, where these arrangements exist. It is true that those who are being entered for the Higher Level examinations will be taught more knowledge and skills than those doing the Foundation Level. Generally speaking, however, the overriding concern of the teacher is that the pupil will be able to do the required work and, as a result, meet their target grade. Given that so much teacher and pupil time is invested in meeting these targets, it is not difficult to see how all the available routes towards making this possible will be explored and implemented. If there were a risk that, by doing the Higher Paper, the pupil might fail the examination or fall below her target grade, the advice would be to do the Foundation Level. Some of the teachers in the Kite Hill study gave examples of the approach they would take in such a situation, being very mindful of the damage that might be done to the pupils' self-esteem if by doing the Foundation paper, they would come to see themselves as being cast as a low achiever. As one teacher noted:

... you just have to explain to them, 'You know, where will you be better off at the end of this?' and try and show them that they might be better off ultimately than the people that are going to do the more difficult one ... and that eventually, you know, things could even themselves out a bit if they really go for it,



but it always has to be the right steps forward.  
(Teacher A.E.)

Whilst the approach of strategic entry into Foundation Level may bring about an improved chance of pupils gaining what was the all-important C grade, some expressed their disappointment at what they perceived as a loss of opportunity – either to study a wider range of topics or just to try the Higher Papers, as shown by the following comment from one of the Year 13 interviewees.

In GCSEs they did Foundation and Higher Papers and I noticed, like – I always did Higher Papers, but people that didn't, they'd be, like, "Well, I can only get this level and there's no way for me to go up from there" ... .  
(Kyna, Year 13)

Parents also sometimes make it known to their child's school that entry into Foundation Level is not something they are happy about. For one of the Kite Hill parents, as illustrated in the Field Notes extract below, the fact that his daughter was not going to be entered into the Higher Level GCSE exam meant that her dreams of going on to study A-level in that subject would be over.

*I took a phone call from a parent about the letter he had received from one of the subject departments, which informed him that his daughter would be entered for Foundation Level GCSE. The parent said that this was unacceptable to him and his wife; they felt that their daughter was capable of doing the Higher Level paper. She was planning to do an A-Level in the subject and knew that a 'B' would be required to gain entry onto the course. The Foundation Level paper was capped at a 'C' so this would mean an end to her ambitions. After the phone call, I spoke to the Head of Department who explained that the pupil in question would struggle with the Higher Level material and, if she sat the examination, there was a likelihood of her failing it. Better, he said, to do the Foundation Level where there was a good chance of her achieving a 'C'. I then went back to the parent to try and explain this, but he was still adamant that his daughter would be doing the Higher Paper.*  
(Extract from Field Notes)

It seems, therefore, that in the case of entry into different tiers of GCSE examinations, the very thing that the teachers are trying to do in order to be fair, i.e. give children the assessment that it is believed they can be successful in, is seen here by learners and parents as being unfair in that it prevents even the possibility of higher levels being achieved. As noted by Gillborn and Youdell

It is a cruel irony that the processes of selection and monitoring that have been adopted with the aim of heightening attainment are so frequently experienced as disempowering and demotivating by pupils. (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 195)

However, the restricting or reducing of what is taught is not universally seen as a bad thing. One of the Kite Hill teachers described a situation where a mother complained not that her daughter was receiving too little knowledge, but too much and, as a result, was becoming overwhelmed by the amount of things that she was expected to learn. The teacher recalled the incident that took place at a Parents' Evening and said:

I've got one girl, she's in Year 9 at the moment and her mum kind of had a go at me last Parents' Evening and said, "It's ridiculous, you've taught her three ways to say 'you' in German..." her Mum was really, quite – you're burdening her with this information she doesn't need... (Teacher L.R.)

This snapshot illustrates how difficult it can be to strike a balance between ensuring that all children have access to a broad curriculum at the same time as ensuring that no-one feels completely out of their depth.

Looking once more at the Raveaud, (2005) study, the view is expressed that by giving easier work to those who struggle, not only does this deny them the possibility of higher attainment but also reinforces the very inequalities that differentiation seeks to tackle:

There is a profound dilemma here, which is not often made explicit, between a genuine concern to protect self-esteem and avoid disaffection on one hand, and a reification of initial academic differences due to social and cultural background. (Raveaud, 2005: 474)

To try and personalise the teaching, learners are taught more or less of the curriculum according to their individual targets, perceived needs or membership of a pre-determined group. A process of 'dosing' then emerges whereby different pupils receive varying amounts of the education on offer – a single spoonful here, and a double spoonful there. The impetus from this stems mainly from the pressure on schools not to 'allow' the failure of any pupils in terms of their GCSE results. Schools that are trying to get as many learners as possible to meet the Government floor standards and ensure that they all meet their externally set targets, implement a number of strategies to try and bring these things to fruition. Some pupils, for example, may be restricted in the number or range of GCSE subjects they can take, whilst others will be advised to do the Foundation Level qualification so as to maximize their chances of achieving a C grade – a failure to achieve on the Higher Level papers could bring the risk of a U grade ('unclassified'). The key Government performance indicator at the time I carried out my research was measured in terms of the percentage of pupils gaining GCSE grades A\*- C; a U grade, therefore, was an unwelcome outcome.

### **Differentiation and pupils' self-esteem**

Many of the participants in the Kite Hill study, both teachers and pupils, spoke of how embarrassed and upset learners could become when given easier work. Some of this has already been discussed, but a further example warrants some more space here because the following incident, recounted by one of the teacher participants, illustrates the deep-seated resistance by some learners to engage in what they see as work at a lower level. An Easter GCSE revision course had been organized at Kite Hill and one of the Heads of Department had decided to structure the sessions around two groups taught simultaneously, one for pupils who had high targets and the other for those with lower targets. However, concerned about making visible the names of the girls assigned to the two groups because of the potential damage to their self esteem, she elected to tell them into which room they should go when they first arrived. However, some girls went straight to the teaching rooms without first checking with the Head of Department:

L.C. So some of the A, A\* girls went into ...  
 E.L. No, it was the other way round.  
 L.C. Ah ...  
 E.L. Always the other way round.  
 L.C. The C/D borderliners ...  
 E.L. Yes.  
 L.C. Making a bee-line ...  
 E.L. Yes, yup.  
 L.C. For the A/A\* room.  
 E.L. I don't know whether that was based on their perception of themselves, um, whether they saw themselves in a dumbed down class ... .

This extract illustrates the rejection, by some of the learners, of being a member of what they have come to see as a 'failure group' concomitant, perhaps, with the reduced amount of knowledge and skills on offer. This is not surprising, given the rhetoric surrounding failure heard so often from successive political leaders. An example of this is in one of the then Prime Minister's speeches on education (2011) where he said:

So, as I'm in a school today, let me, as it were, spell it out. There will be no more excuses for failure with this government.  
 (David Cameron, speech at Norwich Free School, 2011)

There is also a strong societal belief that in education, higher is better than lower: A\* is good and D bad. These things have served to cause some learners to reject the thought that they are part of a low-performing group. As noted by Gillborn and Youdell (2000), pupils know that a place in a higher group equates with success.

They are unsure of the process but they seem to recognize clearly that their peers in the higher groups are somehow destined for greater things.  
 (Gillborn and Youdell (2000: 173)

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I looked at some of the different ways teachers adapt their pedagogy to meet the perceived needs of pupils, thereby trying to personalise their learning. Looking at the responses from the interviewed pupils, one can see that these approaches taken by teachers were not perceived as neutral acts. Instead, they contributed to the self-perceptions of the learners: easier work, for example, seen as an indicator of their lack of ability and harder tasks interpreted as evidence that the teacher had more faith in the capability of those particular pupils. We looked at two ways in which differentiation might be interpreted: by teachers in England as a requirement to prepare different levels of worksheet or pose questions with various degrees of difficulty, and by teachers in France as a need to offer additional help or repeated explanations to pupils who have not grasped what is being taught. We also looked at how education can become 'dosed'; mechanistic, performativity driven policies influencing the curriculum and the teaching, determining who is taught what and at which level.

In the next chapter I will look further into how pupils begin to construct a self-image that is in part, shaped by institutionalised practices and beliefs. As described by Brine, who undertook research into learners' experiences of bi-lateral schooling where grammar and secondary modern pupils were taught on a shared site but whose paths were as separate as if they had been many miles apart, '... structures are themselves constitutive and dynamic' (Brine, 2006: 51). That is to say the school architecture of classes, groups and sets, personalisation and differentiation, serve to provide not just a framework or a backdrop, but a living, speaking world of people classification where pupils have to negotiate their status and their inclusion or exclusion from particular groups. (See also Benjamin et al. (2003))

## **Chapter Five                      'If you're an A\* student...' – how pupils begin to construct their self-images**

### **Introduction**

Schools are, as most people know, institutions where lessons are taught and knowledge learnt. They are also, however, places where pupils construct images of themselves and of others, often in terms of competence, success and failure. The 'good pupil' or the 'class clown' do not materialize out of nowhere, but are grown, constituted, changed, re-worked and evolved, at least in part, through school structures, processes and the experiences of learners and teachers. In this chapter we will look in more detail at the connections between some of day-to-day practices in schools and how they impact on the self-images of pupils. As education becomes more personalised, decisions need to be made about pedagogical approaches, resources and interventions. In short, questions about 'who gets what' must be asked and answered. Given that pupils are rarely consulted on how their learning might be personalised, some will begin to form views about themselves in terms of how the school 'sees' them. The following extract from my Field Notes illustrates that even the allocation of classrooms can spawn thoughts for some pupils about what the school believes to be their capabilities.

*At our regular morning meeting, one of my Deputy Heads recalled an incident in a previous school where a Year 11 boy had an outburst after being given his timetable for the year. 'Room 2 for Maths?' he shouted. 'I can't believe it. That's the room for dummies. I went there in Year 7 for extra Maths and in Year 8. I asked them to move me in Year 9 but I still had to go there. And now I'm in Room 2 again, so I must still be so bad at Maths that they have to put me there for Year 11'. (Extract from Field Notes)*

## **Performativity and pupils' self-images**

A number of researchers (see Putwain (2009), Seiffert (2004), Boaler et al. (2000) and Reay (2006)), have shown how, when pupils are learning in a highly performative educational landscape, studded with levels, grades, top groups, bottom groups, help sheets and catch-up sessions, pupils begin to equate academic success with self-worth. If educational provision is made according to perceived need, i.e. personalised, it is then not perhaps surprising that pupils begin to equate this variance with what they see as their capabilities or lack thereof. In other words, pupils start to think of their ability, as measured and evidenced by many of the school structures that surround them, as commensurate with their self-worth. Ability, in this sense, becomes not something you *have*, but something you *are*. Atkinson (1998) described how, in the teaching of Art, pupils' work was compared against a set of criteria in order to arrive at a particular judgment regarding its quality. He asserts that:

Such criteria establish a normalizing discourse which separates and categorizes individual ability. The pupils *become* their abilities.' (Original italics) (Atkinson, 1998: 32)

Reay and Wiliam undertook a research project whereby they observed and interviewed Year 6 pupils who were approaching their Key Stage 2 assessments. It became apparent that there was a great deal of anxiety generated by the prospect of the tests and that the children, in their discussions with the researchers, had begun to talk about 'being' their predicted test results rather than having them, as illustrated by the following excerpt.

Hannah: I'm really scared about the SATS (standard assessment tasks). Mrs O'Brien (a teacher at the school) came and talked to us about our spelling and I'm no good at spelling and David (the class teacher) is giving us times tables tests every morning and I'm hopeless at times tables so I'm frightened I'll do the SATS and I'll be a nothing. (Reay and Wiliam, 1999: 345).

How pupils see themselves can have a strong effect on their actual performance. In words attributed to Henry Ford, the saying goes that if you think you can or you think you cannot, you are probably right. As noted by Feuerstein:

... a child's success at solving intellectual problems is as dependent on his feelings of competence as his actual competence; for if the first is not present, children become so convinced of their likely failure that they do not attempt to solve problems, or do so only half-heartedly and with an expectation of defeat. (Feuerstein, cited in Proctor, 1990: 181)

Cimpian et al. (2011) discovered that even when activities such as games are presented to children as being linked to a particular social group, e.g. 'boys are good at this game' (ibid.: 1), the effect on the participants was notable:

... even when no preexisting information was available about an activity and even when the participants were as young as age 4 – simply establishing a link between this activity and a social category induces entity beliefs that are sufficiently powerful to debilitate performance. (Cimpian et al. 2011: 2)

What we are beginning to see in schools is that the very structures designed to maximize pupil performance may be having almost the reverse effect. Once pupils become aware of where they are positioned in terms of the hierarchy of expected attainment, far from feeling empowered to succeed, some feel discouraged and disenabled. As stated by Puttwain

In order to avoid 'letting themselves down', students imposed conditions of worth on themselves based on the attainment of external goals defined in relation to KS4 assessments. (Puttwain, 2009: 398)

For the Kite Hill pupils, it was clear that some of the school structures and practices influenced how they perceived themselves as learners. There was a sense that it was better not to be in the situation where it appeared to others that you lacked competence. As described by one of the Year 13 pupils:



I don't think I ever got the easy worksheet, um, so  
it wasn't sort of – for me it was fine. (India, Year 13).

The use of 'fine' here suggests perhaps that if she had been the one to receive the easier worksheets, then things would not have been so fine; it would have been an unwelcome manifestation of a being seen as someone who was incapable of doing the harder work. Another pupil described how she felt under pressure to say that she had understood something when, in fact, that was not the case.

... when you go and see a teacher you sometimes  
don't want to say if you still don't understand what  
they're saying, you feel like you should be understanding  
and you just look – 'Oh yes, I understand' ... . (Karly Y13).

It would seem here, that the powerful influence of 'success' being defined as someone who always gets things right, left this pupil in the position of not being able to let her teacher know that she still was not clear about something that she herself felt she should already know or be able to do. The following pupil statement illustrates how school practices, especially those that serve to personalise the provision by the offer of different approaches for different learners, can be understood as a clear indication that someone was struggling. In her view, it was a straightforward equation and the opposite hypothesis, i.e. the possibility of extra help being offered to further improve someone's progress where they were already doing well, did not seem to be something that she had considered.

... as horrible as it sounds – the people who are  
getting extra help are the ones who are struggling.  
(Eliza, Year 13)

As Eliza began her next sentence she did so in a way that shows how GCSE grades can become cemented into the learners' identities so that a grade is not so much something you have, but something you are.

I mean, if you're an A\* student ... (Eliza, Year 13)

Burr describes a similar example of the way in which language and beliefs reflect symbiotically back and forth and can therefore change the way we

think. Her example is that the word 'homosexual' was originally an adjective, but is now generally used as a noun. Burr goes on to explain that

This means that it is now possible to talk about 'a homosexual', which is a person, rather than 'homosexual practices' which is something a person does. Almost as if by magic, the linguistic trick of turning an adjective into a noun has created a certain kind of person. Burr (1995: 49)

In my example, Eliza has conjured up a student, not a tall one, or a blonde one, or a sporty one – but a very specific and attractive-sounding sort - an A\* one. The stratification of subject knowledge so prevalent in the discourse of examination (my phrase for teaching that is concentrated almost entirely on preparing pupils for exams) spawns a corresponding type of learner; in the same way they know certain types of skills and knowledge are required in order to attain the different GCSE and A-Level grades, a matching set of 'student-type' begins to materialize. The 'B' student, the 'D' student, and so on: each with its own associations of skills, ability and dispositions. For most learners, identifying with the higher-grade image is much more attractive than the prospect of being a 'G' student (G was the lowest GCSE grade).

It is clear that learners may find it very difficult to re-conceptualise themselves as potentially higher achieving pupils when they are assigned low targets, especially given the official nature of these target grades, the amount of time given over to talking about them and that through the reporting and assessment system, pupils' performance is tracked against the target grade throughout the two years of the GCSE courses. The phrases such as 'meeting your target' and being 'on your target' used by pupils, teachers and parents serve to reinforce and embody the importance of this system. The impact of being given low targets is significant for some learners who feel defeated and publicly categorized as being unable to achieve anything better.

Pupils in English schools experience many processes that contribute to how they may come to see themselves as learners and perhaps, more concerning,

as people. Having, or not having, as opposed to being or not being, a GCSE grade is arguably less invasive on a pupil's actualisation of herself as a person. It is much harder to shake off an aspect of something that seems to be part of your lived self as compared with divesting yourself of something you possess. For pupils who have been given low targets, it can be difficult for them to have the confidence to aim higher; the target grade seems to work its way into the centre of their self-actualisation and comments from teachers about how they should try and aim higher than the target do little to attenuate the pervasive and sometimes demoralising power of the official target grades. It is not easy to change one's self-perception as can be seen from the following extract from my Field Notes.

*Taking part in a seminar led by a visiting Canadian professor was an eye-opening experience. To illustrate one of his key points, the attendees were asked to write a list of their own 10 key personal characteristics. Most of us wrote things like: 'tenacious', 'resilient', 'enthusiastic', or 'positive'. Once we had made our list, he asked us to strike out two things. There was a distinct ripple of indignation in the room as we struggled to find two attributes that we would want to take off our list. No sooner had we finished, the professor asked us to take off another two. At this point, audible and visible signs of disgruntlement were very apparent; even as an artificial, pen and paper exercise, it was disquieting to see aspects of ourselves so mercilessly wiped out. The professor's point was that changing pupil behaviour (something that schools often try and do) is difficult because humans find it hard to lose what they see as parts of themselves. (Extract from Field Notes)*

### **Anxiety and Stress**

Fear and worry are aspects of the day-to-day life of many pupils and can become more pronounced in the highly performative and, at times, punitive regime of frequent high-stakes testing. It could be argued that the life of a pupil has always brought elements of fear: worries about making friends, getting lost in a new school building, not being able to do the work, getting bullied, not liking the food, getting told off or having a detention are not

uncommon things for pupils to talk about. What we see in schools now, however, is that there are more pupils who are highly anxious about doing well in public examinations. For some, the pressure is increased because of what they hear from their teachers. One of the interviewees in a study by Putwain put it like this:

They're (teachers) always going on about GCSEs and stuff like that, 'get your coursework done, 'you need to get a C or over' and it just makes you more nervous. Yeah, it's important, but they say it, like, everyday. (Pupil, cited in Puttwain, 2009: 398)

As noted by Jackson, there can be no doubt that many UK school pupils are placed under enormous pressure to perform well in tests. She notes that:

Academic "success" is valued so highly and promoted so strongly in contemporary UK society that fears of academic failure are commonplace in schools. (Jackson, 2010: 41)

A perceived rise in the number of highly anxious and over-stressed pupils and a growing societal concern with the need to offer therapeutic activities, has resulted in schools developing strategies to try and improve the wellbeing of their learners. (See, for example, Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009) The roots of this increase in anxiety are likely to be several fold, but there is a distinct possibility that some of it is connected with what seems to be an almost unstoppable march of strategies that seek to measure, track, check, assess and intervene at almost every stage of pupils' school life, increasingly encroaching on their recreation time, weekends and holidays. We are now not so much looking at school improvement, but an ethically questionable type of pupil improvement. Recent research commissioned by the NUT illustrates how school children can feel highly stressed under the regime of high-stakes testing, with pupils as young as 11 showing signs of physical and mental ill health. A parent (who was also a teacher), interviewed for the study, made the following incisive comment:

My child is in Year 6 and he and his friends were worrying about SATs all through the summer. He has had migraines and a close friend, who is slightly autistic, has been placed on medication because stress caused her to

stop eating. Consequently, I have withdrawn my son from his SATs. I feel measuring teachers and schools has just put a damaging amount of pressure and stress on children from pre-school age. We are causing long-term damage to their mental health and it will impact on society for years to come. (Hutchings, 2015: 56)

There was evidence amongst the Kite Hill pupils of pressure to get things right, to be seen as a successful learner and therefore avoid making mistakes in front of the teacher or large numbers of classmates. This was described quite vividly by one of the Year 12 pupils as shown in this section of her interview.

**L.C.** You feel that working in groups gives you the chance to take more risks?

**K.** Yeah.

**L.C.** So what happens when the teacher's there?

**K.** Like, quite a lot of people don't put their hands up because they don't, like, answer in class, so that means if they don't understand it, they won't get the help they want ... . (Keonah, Year 12)

The feeling that one should understand something and that a failure to do so is a source of embarrassment has already been discussed, but this pupil was not alone in being worried about other pupils' potential reactions to her asking for further explanation in class. Another interviewee shared something similar and said:

... if it's not a big topic and everyone else understands you feel a bit embarrassed to go and see the teacher because you feel like you should get it as well which is what I feel sometimes ... . (Allegra, Year 13)

The idea expressed here that 'everyone else' understood emphasizes the feeling of 'apartness' in the sense of an unwelcome difference, felt by some pupils when they failed to make the progress they thought others were making. The pressure to be seen to achieve academic success at school is felt keenly by many pupils; the failure to understand something that Allegra thinks she should understand and that, she believes, everyone else has understood makes her feel that she might be lacking in some way. The likelihood, of course, that everyone else had actually understood what was

being taught is probably quite slim, but illustrates the anxiety that some pupils feel when they do not grasp what the teacher is saying. Classrooms are semi-public, in the sense that the way pupils answer questions, how often they ask for help, how quickly they finish work and how well they behave, are all played out in front of the teacher and the other children. One of the Kite Hill pupils explained clearly and simply why it is pupils might not want to ask the teacher to give further explanations. She said:

... people might think they're stupid for asking questions. (Keonah, Y12)

It seems that the feeling of being the one person in a group not to understand something or not to be up to the standard of the other people, is not a pleasant one. The following extract from my Field Notes illustrates an example of this type of situation.

*I was having a conversation with my daughter (aged 27) about her recent skiing lesson. She had not taken to it in the way she had hoped. When it came time for the group to go off and practise their new skills, the instructor told her to stay behind to get more help. My daughter said that she did not enjoy feeling like the worst in the class, especially as at school, she had usually been the one getting extension work. I reflected that my daughter had constructed an image of herself as a successful learner as, at least in part, because of things that happened at school, for example, receiving extension work, generally perceived by pupils as something that happened only to those who had the ability to do it. (Extract from Field Notes)*

Undertaking research into how Primary School children come to see themselves in terms of their competence in reading, enabled Scherer (2016) to understand how 'cleverness' becomes associated with reading skills, and that the pupils, through their work in pairs and groups, come to believe that some children are cleverer than others. Whilst it would not be unusual for teachers to hear children talk like this, what Scherer's study shows is that those who see themselves at the bottom of the classroom hierarchy, can become disenabled and disillusioned, thus preventing them from engaging in activities that could potentially help them improve their reading skills.

Some children in this position were also seen expending energy, through their talk and behaviour, on trying to distance themselves from their membership of the 'poor reader' group – energy that could, perhaps, have instead been used to work on becoming a better reader. In short, the processes and structures put in place by the school in order to offer different levels of challenge to individuals and groups of pupils i.e. personalised provision, served at least in part to make difference both unwelcome and inhibiting.

As well as trying to structure their lessons so as to support and challenge everyone in all of their classes, Kite Hill teachers were very sensitive to how pupils might feel about not understanding something and worked hard to protect them from experiences they thought might be potentially upsetting or embarrassing. One interviewee described how, when she asked pupils if everyone was happy for her to move on, i.e. that they had all understood, she would ask them to put their heads down on the desk so that no-one could see who was putting up their hand to indicate that no, they were not happy for the teacher to move on and that there was still something unclear. She also took this protective strategy a little further in that on the occasions where nobody had put up their hand, she would pretend that some people had indeed done so.

And even if nobody has put their hand up,  
I'll pretend somebody has, so that then they'll  
think, 'Oh I got that, but somebody else didn't',  
and it just gives them that little boost to think,  
'I've understood something that somebody didn't' ...  
(Teacher L.R.)

Whilst it could be argued that this arrangement served to perpetuate the vulnerable status of the non-knower and the superior position of the knower, the teacher had clearly given a great deal of thought as to how she might enable her pupils to have a more positive learning experience than her own where pupils were routinely 'put on the spot'.

...I can remember, like, back to lessons that I  
had in class, you're just dreading being asked,  
because you don't – it's like, 'Don't pick me' ...'.  
(Teacher L.R.)

## **Fixing Mindsets**

The setting of personalised targets, the use of differentiated worksheets, the asking of different levels of questions and the invitation/requirement to attend additional tuition outside of normal teaching time will be familiar experiences for most state school pupils in England. Whilst these mechanisms are all designed to help them access work confidently, make good progress from their different starting points and enjoy success in public examinations, the impact on how pupils see themselves as learners should be something that teachers, parents and policy makers take seriously. Pupils' mindsets are known to contribute quite significantly to how well they engage in their schoolwork. Mueller and Dweck (1998) make the point that pupils who receive praise for their intelligence, rather than their effort, may be less likely to engage with challenging tasks. Wishing to preserve their reputation as being clever, pupils who receive this type of praise may avoid doing things that might make them look less clever, i.e., struggle with more difficult work. On the other hand, children who receive praise for their effort are more likely to remain engaged with the challenging activities. In English schools there is a risk that, by attempting to personalise the educational offer, the likelihood of pupils having a fixed mindset is heightened. Learners who are given low GCSE target grades may question whether their efforts are really going to make any difference. As stated by one of the Kite Hill teachers who took part in my King's Institution Focused Study:

If you are putting down on paper, D,D,D,D,D and if a pupil is working at their absolute best ... I would find that very demoralizing. (Teacher of Geography, cited in Ceska, 2013: 22)

Pupils targeted A\* and A grades may at first be very happy, but then become disinclined to engage with activities that might expose them as perhaps not being as successful as their high target grades suggest. Lulled into a sense that their intelligence (as evidenced by their high target grades) will simply carry them through to a shiny future, teachers at times see them stop trying



if it looks like the coveted top grade might not be so easily forthcoming. As another of the teachers interviewed for my IFS said:

If they are not going to get an A\*, they will stop bothering altogether. (Teacher of Drama, cited in Ceska, 2013: 28)

By fixing pupils' mindsets, the very thing that is a tenet of sustained learning – expressed in everyday language as a 'can-do attitude' – is at risk of being diminished.

Given that much of our society emphasises success as measured by doing well in tests, it is not surprising that pupils do not wish to be seen not to be doing well. Whilst the narrative of valuing diversity is prevalent in many schools, in practice there are pervasive indicators at work throughout a child's school experience, which illustrate that perhaps this is not really the case or that only some differences are officially approved of. The school structures and practices that position some pupils as in need of extra help, easier work or simpler questions may, instead of narrowing the gap between those who make good progress and those who do not, serve to make it wider by diminishing some learners' self-belief, which in turn impacts on their confidence in their ability to make good progress. The recipients of classroom tasks or questions that would appear to have been made easier contribute strongly to a construction of their self-images as lacking or as failing, neither of which is conducive to engaging enthusiastically with learning, growing a positive attitude or developing resilience. Children can be quick to see themselves in a class hierarchy in terms of how they perceive of their own and others' abilities to acquire knowledge and skills. Giddens argues that the epoch in which we live, i.e. that of high modernity, gives rise to particular societal divisions, which can manifest themselves in today's institutions. He states that:

Modernity, one should not forget, produces *difference exclusion* and *marginalisation* (original italics). Holding out the possibility of emancipation, modern institutions at the same time create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualisation, of self. (Giddens, 1991: 6)

We can certainly see how Giddens's description of modern institutions is played out in our schools. Education is a key mechanism by which pupils, through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, can be emancipated and empowered to fulfill their human potential. However, through current structures, hierarchies and processes, education can become differently distributed so as to reify difference rather than help equalize opportunity.

## **Conclusion**

Many of our school structures, processes and policies, even if well-intentioned and designed primarily to help fulfill human potential, can instead become detrimental to the very people that they were designed to assist – the pupils. Powerful forces are at work here, shaping learners' self-images in a way that may not be helpful to their sustained engagement with the educational opportunities on offer to them. Raised levels of stress and anxiety can contribute further to an environment in which pupils lose heart and begin to doubt in their own capability and capacity to be successful.

In a similar way to how pupils may interpret GCSE targets, classroom practices and rooming arrangements as manifestations of their position in the institution – as successful or not so successful – other school processes can have a similar effect on learners' self-images. In the next chapter I will look at planned and organized help and support that takes place outside of timetabled teaching.

## **Chapter Six      Extra help – a kindly offer or a label of inadequacy?**

### **Introduction**

Personalising the learning of pupils can take place both in and outside the classroom. In trying to ensure that the highest number of learners gain the best possible results in their public examinations, schools will often organize additional teaching sessions, aimed at individuals or groups of pupils. Those who are ‘under target’ are particularly likely to be given extra tuition after school, before school, at lunchtime, on Saturday or during the holiday periods. Whilst some pupils will receive extra help because their teachers judge that they would benefit from it, the implementation of this extra help is often driven by the use of punitive actions (e.g. public ‘naming and shaming’ by means of a poor OFSTED rating) for schools failing to meet the required standards. In this chapter we will look at how the requirement on schools to meet Government set standards has influenced actions to implement interventionist strategies of the type which seeks to mobilize additional help and support outside of lessons and aims to ensure every learner meets their externally set GCSE or A-level targets. We will also look at the different ways learners receive and interpret the offer of this type of intervention.

### **Click and compare**

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the provision of additional teaching outside of lesson time is often connected with a school’s concerns over likely outcomes in the GCSE examinations, the interpretation thereof by regulatory bodies, such as OFSTED and the resulting perception of the school by prospective parents. Highly sophisticated technology now enables large amounts of pupil performance data to be centrally stored and accessed. Looking at the current Department for Education School Performance Tables, the general public is invited to: ‘compare school and college performance.’ (DFE Performance Tables 2016)

Once onto the website, viewers are presented with a large amount of information about all state secondary schools and colleges in England, including a link to their most recent OFSTED reports. The examination outcomes for pupils at GCSE and at A-Level are broken down into different groups and information about absence and destinations is available too. There is also a facility to compare any particular school with a group of others that are classed as 'similar' in the sense that the pupils all had comparable levels of attainment at the end of their Primary School education. This data is largely de-contextualised, with information about the particular circumstances of individual schools absent: the context of an institution is considered to be unimportant in terms of the judgments that come to be made by agencies such as OFSTED. For schools to try and give a reason why some learners, for example those who are socially and economically disadvantaged, may not have made the 'right' amount of progress is, in the view of the policy makers, to make excuses. In a speech entitled 'Schools as the engines of social mobility', Nick Gibb, Schools Minister, described how he had asked a council leader to explain the poor GCSE outcomes in his area (in the North of England) and had not been reassured by the response that described how results had actually gone up. The problem, in the view of Nick Gibb was that, even though the results had improved, they were still well below the national average. He went on to state that:

This council leader's excuses for the underperformance of schools in his area represent an unacceptable complacency which prioritises maintaining a comfortable status quo for adults over protecting the life chances of children. (From 'Schools as the Engines of Social Mobility', speech by Nick Gibb on 9.3.16)

With the provision of the Pupil Premium, money in schools' budgets targeted at improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, Government officials maintain that what might be holding back these learners is not poverty, but a failure to provide the right curriculum and a deficiency of expectation, both of which schools are largely responsible for. In a recent

speech to the Sutton Trust, the then Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, explained it like this:

So we will back the smart work of teachers and Headteachers, including many of you here today, to see that the pupil premium achieves even more. As I have said before, the work has got to be about more than 'closing the gap'. Pupils that lag behind their peers should be encouraged to reach their full potential and to go further than simply 'catching up'. If we would want our own children to study the core academic subjects, we should extend that opportunity to every child. The soft bigotry of low expectation has no place in today's schooling. (From a speech by Nicky Morgan, 2015)

### **Good results = good school?**

As previously discussed in Chapter One, many of the mechanisms used to try and measure the quality of UK schools have the effect of presenting the institution that has large number of pupils achieving high grades in public examinations as a de facto good one. The process of using de-contextualised pupil outcome data as a means to try and inform the general public about educational standards is part of a long-standing school improvement movement, which seeks to remove schooling from wider social issues such as housing and employment. The publishing of public examination results carries with it an inherent message about the underlying quality of teaching and, indeed, the teachers themselves. It would not be unusual for parents to conclude that, if the GCSE and A-Level results are good in a particular school, then the quality of the teaching must also be good. As explained by Reay, the drive to improve teachers was thought to be key to raising standards and could be undertaken outside of any debate about the social background of the learners and the schools they attend.

The focus was to be on teachers and within school and particularly within classroom processes. If we can only make teachers good enough, equip them with sufficient skills and competencies then the wider social context of schooling is seen as unimportant. (Reay, 2006: 291)

As a school leader with many years of experience in teaching children from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, my belief is that the publication of large amounts of data is not helpful in terms of trying to gain an understanding about the quality of a school. As noted by Gorard, there are real problems in trying to show the effectiveness of a school by using performance in public examinations as the yardstick. Focusing, in particular, on Government attempts to undertake value-added analyses he makes the following statement:

Families may have been misled about the relative effectiveness of their local schools, with the schools in poorer areas and with academically weaker intakes suffering from this misguided comparison dressed up as a fair test.

He continues:

The majority of the variation in school examination outcomes can be explained by the intake to the school (prior attainment, socio-economic background and educational need). Gorard (2006: 242)

See also Apple (2004), Gorard (2009), Wiliam (2010), Mansell (2011) and Torrance (2011). <sup>2</sup>

Perhaps politicians, when advocating a 'no excuses' stance, do indeed have the best interests of pupils at heart, but lack knowledge of how difficult life can be for the children for whom even the most basic needs, such as shelter and food, are too often unmet.

Working in a highly pressurised and performative environment, school leaders and teachers have responded to the narrow focus on examination results, by engaging in increasing amounts of additional teaching. This might be in the form of after or before-school classes, lunchtime sessions, Saturday and holiday revision classes, one-to-one tuition, and the removal of some pupils from Form Period, Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), Core PE and other non-examination courses so that they can attend 'booster' or

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<sup>2</sup> For an insight into some of the unintended consequences of the American No Child Left Behind Act, see Finnigan and Gross (2007)

'catch-up' classes. Pupils who appear not to be meeting their targets may also be given a mentor. This could be an older pupil, a teacher or member of the support staff whose role it is to support their mentee in working hard, meeting deadlines and trying to achieve their targets. This raft of additional help has grown significantly over the last few years, reflecting, at least in part, the increasing pressure on schools to ensure that, above all else, their pupils attain good results as measured by GCSE and A-Levels. For school leaders, the prospect of slipping down the league tables is a fearsome one, bringing with it a number of possible serious consequences. If parental confidence is lost, a drop in pupil numbers is likely. This means that the school will receive lower levels of funding, threatening every aspect of the provision – from the breadth of the curriculum to the fabric of the building.

### **The Kite Hill perspective**

Teachers offering pupils extra help outside of lessons is nothing new and the informal arrangements that probably always existed, continue to be used now. As explained by one of the Year 13 pupils:

... Miss G, she'll also write, you know, come and see me if you don't understand ... . (Allegra, Year 13)

What is now different is that additional help has become cemented into the daily life and structures of the school. It is regulated, scheduled, and evaluated, almost in the same way as timetabled lessons. Another change is that instead of teachers using their professional judgment to decide whether a pupil needs help outside of lesson time, the decision about who is to receive this support, when this should happen and how, is more likely to be made by Senior Leaders who devote significant amounts of time to analysing data on how pupils are performing in relation to their externally set GCSE and A-Level targets. Pupils are strongly encouraged (and sometimes instructed) to attend the extra sessions that they have been directed towards and their parents alerted if they do not comply. So thickly is this additional support now woven into the fabric of the school that pupils and parents show concern if revision and booster sessions appear not to be running, 'as usual'. The following extract from my Field Notes illustrates

how pupils can come to expect teachers to provide additional tuition during the holiday periods.

*One of my Senior Leaders had been observing an A-Level lesson, taught by an experienced Head of Department. Afterwards she spoke to me about how well it had gone. Something had surprised her, however: one of the girls seemed not as engaged in the lesson as is usually the case at Kite Hill. Towards the end, the girl raised her hand and said, in quite a forthright tone, that she expected Miss Z would indeed be putting on Easter Revision Sessions and, as such, could the class please be told when they would take place. My Assistant Head thought that perhaps the girl had been quite passive in the lesson because she believed that, come the Easter Holidays, she would be re-taught the content during the revisions sessions. (Extract from Field Notes)*

At Kite Hill, teachers continue to offer informal extra help as determined by their own judgements on how learners are faring in their progress, understanding and confidence. However, as teachers' success in raising the attainment of pupils in terms of externally set targets or their membership of externally set groups, (e.g. High Prior Attainment) becomes evermore closely scrutinised, they may find that their workload increases: extra help for those who are struggling to understand something *and* extra help for those who are below target. The following extract from my Field Notes illustrates how what I term 'traditional help', i.e. a teacher using her or his professional judgment to decide whether or not to provide extra teaching, comes to be appreciated by learners and their parents.

*I spoke to a very happy parent today. Her daughter (in Year 11) and a couple of friends had just finished a morning exam and did not have one scheduled for the afternoon. They were worried, however, about an exam later in the week and approached their teacher to ask for help. The resulting two hours of revision and practical support made a huge difference, said the parent, to her daughter's confidence and readiness to take the exam. I reflected that there is no substitute for this type of authentic connection between learner and*



*teacher. I also reflected that I had never received such warm appreciation for any of the timetabled Easter Revision sessions. (Extract from Field Notes)*

The offer of help is generally viewed (by those who are making the offer) as a kind gesture, something that probably makes the person who is suggesting that support be given, believe that they have acted in the best interests of the proposed beneficiary. However, similar to the way in which the giving of differentiated work, or the asking of differently levelled questions are not the neutral acts they may at first appear to be, the experience of being offered extra help also seems to contribute towards some pupils' loss of self-belief and self-worth.

Pupils in the Kite Hill study were asked if they or their friends had been offered additional help and how they had felt about it. One of the interviewees reported that the offer of extra help was a response by the school to her friend's learning difficulty.

Yeah, one of my friends did (get extra help) because she's dyslexic. So she got extra help outside of school with one of her teachers here and I think it helped her. (Keonah, Year 12)

She went on to say a bit more, adding

I think at first she was embarrassed because it was, like, no-one else was getting it that she knew, it was a bit, like, this is the pits and hard, and like – we all wanted to go home and she had to stay at school. But after a while, she was, like, this is really helping me. (Keonah, Year 12)

We can see in Keonah's statement that although the additional help was, in the end, seen as beneficial, the friend in question did not simply accept it unquestioningly, but showed embarrassment and a sense of being made to feel different. The mention of the response from the wider circle of friends gives an insight into how pupils navigate complex social positioning, which might be subject to a deterioration in standing, once it becomes known that someone is getting extra help. Some may be particularly sensitive to how it is they are perceived by others and go to great lengths to preserve a

positive, successful image. As discussed in Chapter 5, the personalisation of school-based education enacted in a system heavily textured with performativity measures can influence how pupils begin to see themselves as either more, or less successful, learners.

If it were possible to make a graphic representation of all the relationships, connections and ruptures that are made throughout pupils' time in school, it would probably look like a spider's web but one that is constantly changing its structure through breakages, repairs and the creation of new strands. As noted by Nuthall, pupils do not simply learn the subject content of their lessons in a vacuum. They also learn about what the teacher does, what other pupils do, how things are organized and what others think of them. In short, learning takes place in a social setting. He explains it like this:

... much of what students learn, and how they learn it, is bound up with their peer culture. Students live in a personal and social world as well as in the world of teacher-managed activities, and much of the knowledge that students acquire comes from their peers. When it does, it comes enveloped inside their social relationships. During class activities, what students learn and how they learn it depends on the way they interact with other students, and that interaction depends on their social status within the peer culture ... (Nuthall, 2007: 157)

Within Keonah's statement is also the sense of concern, expressed by the student who is receiving the extra help, that no-one else seems to be getting it, thereby making her feel as if she is being treated differently to others. This was a sentiment echoed by another girl who said, that if she was offered extra help, she would be thinking:

Yeah, a little bit like – 'Why are you – yeah, why am I getting this, and no one else'? (India, Year 13)

In Chapter 3, we looked at the challenges of providing individualised or 'special' treatment for pupils without making them feel different. Here we see another expression of the same human paradox: being treated as an individual is an attractive prospect, but if, as part of that, we sense being

singled out and set, in some way, apart from others, our positive response quickly wanes.

Not all the pupil interviewees, however, interpreted the offer of organised additional help as something that might make them feel upset. One of the Year 12s viewed it as a something quite straightforward and beneficial in terms of improving her understanding in a particular subject.

Um, I received some extra help in Science last year from the tutor and it was really helpful for me – it made everything seem a bit clearer, so that was good and that was once a week.  
(Elena, Year 12)

In the same way that this pupil was confident that the additional help had been useful for her, another explained that it had resulted in grades that she was happier with. She explained that:

... when I got extra help for Physics, it did massively improve my grades ... .  
(Allegra, Year 13)

However, she then went on to reflect that some pupils do not realise that, as well as getting extra help from their teachers, they also need to put in some additional effort themselves.

... some people might think, oh well, like, I've got the extra help so that should be enough. Like, I should get it now and go home and not do – like go the extra mile 'cos they feel they've already done it ... like psychologically, well, I've got the extra help, so it should be fine now.  
(Allegra, Year 13)

The issue that Allegra touches on here - pupils' agency and the responsibility they are prepared to take for their learning - will be further explored in Chapter 8.

## **The different faces of help**

As schools in England continue to try and personalise the educational experience of each individual pupil, often with the aim of ensuring the best possible grades in public examinations, it becomes increasingly the case that many of them will receive significant amounts of additional help in the form of intervention that is organised, formalised and measured. This institutionalised approach to preparing pupils for high-stakes assessments may perhaps be causing them never to experience what could be termed, 'the reality of endeavour', i.e. the knowledge that, in order to achieve something worthwhile, hard work, commitment and perhaps a degree of struggle, is necessary. This idea that some might not understand that their own effort is required in order to make progress was echoed by one of the teachers who recalled having asked groups of learners what sort of Easter revision sessions they would most like.

**L.C.** So ... you ask them what they want, they say, 'A taught session please', but you're not entirely sure they know what they mean by that?

**U.I.** Exactly, exactly. I don't think the girls actually know what – well, I think what they want is you to give them all the answers ... . (Teacher U.I.)

When high-stakes assessment begins to dominate the education agenda, teachers and learners concentrate significant amounts of their energy on what it is that will need to be done to get the desired outcome in the public examinations. In a study that explores the tensions between creativity and performativity in the subject of Design and Technology, Nichol and McLellan (2008) found that teachers, when working in a highly performative arena, came to prioritise the work that would help assure a higher GCSE grade for their pupils. This caused the teachers to experience an inner conflict with what they felt the subject should be about – i.e. enabling pupils to explore their creativity - and what they actually did, which was primarily to ensure good examination outcomes. Ball explores this tension between what the teachers believe to be right and what the regime of edumetrics requires them to do. He explains it like this:

We are unsure what aspects of work are valued and how to prioritize efforts. We become uncertain about the reasons for our actions. Are we doing it because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? (Ball, 2003: 220)

Additional help and support in schools is now so often focused on helping pupils gain the best possible grades in high-stakes examinations, a gulf, I think, is opening up between learning for intrinsic joy and the activities that prepare children for assessment. As noted by Torrance et al.,

In a very real sense we seem to have moved from 'assessment *of* learning' through 'assessment *for* learning' to 'assessment *as* learning', for both learners and tutors alike, with assessment procedures completely dominating both pedagogy and the learner experience. (Torrance et al. 2005: 47)

The offer and the receipt of extra help is something that, for some pupils, they would rather not have others know about. One of the interviewees was grateful that the teachers who were offering extra help had said that no-one else need know if there was anyone wanting to come and find her and get further explanations for anything they had not understood. She explained that:

... they (pupils) don't need to say in front of the class that they don't understand in front of their friends or anything, they can go and the teacher goes it will be confidential, if they don't want anyone to know. (Siobhan, Year 12)

The reference to something being 'confidential' is generally used when the issue is one of a highly sensitive and personal nature, but here we are seeing the vulnerability of some learners who want the fact that they have not understood something to be kept between themselves and their teacher. The pressure to ensure that good grades are achieved in public examinations is felt not just by the teachers but by the pupils too, and some do not wish to share with their friends the fact that they may be struggling and might, therefore, benefit from some extra help. Such was the need for another pupil to ensure that her self-image was not in any way compromised, that when, in her previous school she received extra help for

GCSE English, she told her friends that she had asked for it rather than it having been given to her. The power and control was thus still in her own hands.

**Z.** Um, at my old school ... I also had free periods because I dropped a subject at GCSE so then during that time I would get extra help for English.

**L.C.** And how did you feel about that?

**Z.** Um, first it was, like, OK, they think I'm a bit stupid, that's why they're giving me extra help, but then I realised by my Mock grade and my target that I need extra help, so then I kind of told everyone that I was asking for it and they didn't come to me first.

**L.C.** You told your friends that you had asked for it?

**Z.** Yes.

**L.C.** Because?

**Z.** Otherwise it makes – you know – O.K, she's really – is she really that bad at English that they want her to come, or, you know, they are coming to her, rather than me being a bit more enthusiastic saying I need English so I'm going to ask. (Zaara, Year 12)

This excerpt shows the journey that Zaara underwent when she was offered extra help in English. At first she felt that others doubted her capabilities, but after some reflection came to the conclusion that there was evidence (the difference between her Mock grade and her target) that would suggest extra help might be a good idea. However, the final step, i.e. talking to others about it, was too uncomfortable and in order to preserve her public image, she found it easier to say that she had asked for the help rather than it being the school that had given it to her.

Another interviewee said that she thought additional support was something only certain categories of pupils would need. Although the phrase 'special needs' is not generally used by teachers at Kite Hill in their day-to-day interactions with their classes it is nonetheless a phrase that has come to be known by some of the learners. In this case 'special needs' brings with it the sense that this is a group who are different to others in that they are the ones needing extra help. She explained:

... some people need the extra help and some people don't. So if you need extra help, like say if

you have, uh, what's it called, special, special education, I don't know – special needs or something, yeah if you have that, if you have – yeah – then it, you need extra help so you can get to the level everyone else has got to, but if you don't, if you're fine with the way you're learning and you know how you learn, then it doesn't really matter, I don't think. (Yasira, Year 12)

Another pupil shared a similar belief and when asked whether any of her friends had received extra help, said:

No, but most of my friends, kind of, they're on the cleverer side ... (Karly, Year 13)

Some pupils, however, did not associate the offer of extra help with any perceived deficits and were quite happy with the prospect. One of the Year 13s expressed a great deal of positivity and explained how she saw it as an emotionally supportive gesture:

... I think it's nice when teachers or, like, your parents or something they actually acknowledge that what you're doing is quite difficult and that they can support you. (Jamie, Year 13)

Another interviewee was also very positive about the extra help her friends had received and rejected the possibility that being chosen as the one to get help was anything other than a good thing. She did not espouse the label of inadequacy in which some of the other interviewees had framed the offer of additional support.

**L.C.** Now, have you or any of your friends received any extra help at school?

**S.** Yes, some of my friends have and they benefitted from that because obviously the teacher, um, singles them out and thinks they are not doing well, but then it gives them a boost when they have help.

**L.C.** And they didn't feel a bit kind of down when they heard they were going to get some extra help?

**S.** I don't think so. I think they just realized that maybe it was for the best and the teacher does it for their best interest, so yeah. (Sabine, Year 12)

What we see here is that the mindset, which influences the way in which pupils receive the idea of extra help, can differ quite significantly between

one individual and another. Some, like Sabine, think that 'being singled out by the teacher' is nothing other than a helpful, beneficial thing, whilst Zaara's response, looked at earlier in this chapter, shows that she would not want to tell anyone that she had been selected for extra help, preferring instead to tell her friends that it had been her own idea.

In the same way that some pupils feel uncomfortable with being asked easy questions in class and, at the same time, find the prospect of complex questions also disquieting, one interviewee explained that not being offered support would impact on how she felt, but equally, if a teacher did suddenly start to talk about extra help, then that would also cause her to feel upset.

She said:

... if you're not getting the help then you're, kind of, going to feel as though the teacher hasn't really noticed or doesn't care because they're not noticing, but then if they, out of nowhere did – yeah – you know. (Eliza, Year 13)

Many of the Kite Hill pupils showed great faith in their teachers and valued having positive relationships with them. More about this will be discussed in Chapter 7, but for now we can look at how one pupil was initially reluctant to accept help, but because of her trust in the teachers, she came to see that their proposal of dropping a subject was indeed the right thing to do. She explained that:

Because initially, I didn't ask for help and they came to me and I didn't realise how much I was struggling until I had someone to talk to, so I think it may, like – it might seem a bit off-putting when you start off, but it really did help in the end, so I think it's worth it, if there's a reason behind it. (Kyna, Year 12)

Perhaps Kyna felt less undermined or threatened by the offer of extra help because she could see clearly why the teachers had offered her the chance to talk things through and to then drop a subject. Kyna had suffered a period of serious and debilitating illness and explained that:

I really enjoy school. I've had a lot of help from the teachers, before illness and after, so I think it's really good here. (Kyna, Year 12)



This excerpt illustrates an example of what we might call ‘traditional’ personalisation: teachers using their knowledge and expertise to adjust and adapt the provision for a particular pupil. This sits in contrast with ‘managerial’ personalisation whereby the needs of a pupil, and the possibility of additional help and intervention, are largely pre-determined by the group in which they find themselves e.g. Low Prior Attainment or ‘Middle Ability’ or because of a mechanical, data driven formula, which might render the learner ‘below target’ and therefore in need of extra tuition.

Contrasting Kyna’s eventual acceptance of help because of, as she saw it, ‘a reason’, compared with other pupils’ construction of the offer of extra help as a criticism of their capabilities, we can perhaps see a connection with what was discussed in Chapter 4, i.e. the teachers’ attempts to disguise the way they differentiated tasks, worksheets and questions; in trying to smudge or blur the differences between pupils for fear of drawing attention to their possible shortcomings, some of the learners remained unaware that they might at some point require additional help in order to make the sort of progress that will enable them to move successfully to the next stage of their education. When help is then offered, they find it difficult to accept, partly because of an uncomfortable fit with the self-image that they have built for themselves, an image shaped in part by their teachers’ kindly deceit.

One of the teacher interviewees reflected that additional teaching could put unsustainable demands onto the school and said:

... if the student received it as a genuine extra and embraces it, then it is helping her to develop – develop the work further, um, if as in some cases, the pupil sees it as a rather more pleasant alternative to the normal learning then actually it’s not adding anything and in fact, uh, it is potentially resulting in a sort of expectation of additional – as a right to additional support which we cannot always provide and which, in the long term learning of the pupil and the long term development of the person is actually – could be actually quite

detrimental. (Teacher A.Y.)

This statement touches on an important aspect of the growing culture of performativity-driven extra help and support. Given the current pressure on schools, there is a real danger that pupils do not see extra help as 'extra', or, indeed, beneficial, because, in some cases, they are attending the sessions under a degree of duress. Unsurprisingly, those in this situation may lack the intrinsic motivation needed to get the best out of supplementary teaching.

As noted by one of the Year 12 pupils:

But if it was like ... a subject that you don't care about and you are being made to go and do more work for it, they are probably not going to take anything in, so it's, you know, it's – it's whether you want to learn or you don't or whether you are being forced to, or, like, you're going willingly.  
(Zaara, Year 12)

The problem of pupils becoming over-tired as a result of significant amounts of their leisure time being given over to extra tuition is particularly acute in schools where it is said that standards must improve – for example when the results have fallen below Government floor standards or if the institution has been placed in the lower two OFSTED categories. An example of this situation is illustrated by the following extract from my Field Notes.

*I had lunch, one Saturday, with a friend who works in a school that, according to its most recent OFSTED report, 'requires improvement.' Vast amounts of additional teaching were being mobilized by the Senior Leaders; Year 11 pupils were subject to a demanding regime of booster lessons, catch-up work, after-school sessions, before-school extras and Saturday lessons too. The result, she said, was tired, jaded, stressed out pupils and teachers. (Extract from Field Notes)*

Whilst some Kite Hill pupils viewed extra sessions as something they might not be keen to attend, there were, however, some interviewees whose comments echoed the idea of a 'more pleasant alternative to the normal learning' as mentioned by teacher A.Y. One of the Y12 girls reflected that learners could sometimes be quite passive when they attend Easter revision

sessions, not really learning but simply letting someone else do the work.

She said:

... you've checked it over again in your brain, but without it being, like, too intense or anything – because someone else is leading it, and you don't have to focus on what you have to do, then you can just follow along with what they're saying ... .  
(Joni, Year 12)

One of the teachers, who expressed support for Easter revision sessions, thought that it was good for pupils to have tuition from someone else other than their usual teacher in order to gain new insights into some of the syllabus. She said:

I like the idea of Easter revision, um, especially approaching the exam, because I think it – the girls become much more focused anyway, but it also gives them the opportunity of being with different teachers so they are getting a different style, they're maybe getting something presented in a different way ... .  
(Teacher A.U.)

Whilst it is not unreasonable to think that new teachers and new approaches might be a good thing for pupils to experience during revision sessions, this was not a view shared by one of the Year 13s who, when asked whether the Easter sessions were helpful to her, replied:

Um, if I'm honest, no, because the teacher that often runs the Easter Revision isn't your teacher so it changes the teaching style so you, kind of, get more frustrated, or the specific things they go over are the things that you understand and it's the other bits that you don't understand, so for me, it's never really helped. (Eliza, Year 13)

This comment could refer to Eliza's particular likes and dislikes in terms of her teachers, but could also show, I think, how much pupils can feel over-challenged by change and how much they value the constancy offered by their regular teacher and the extent to which this person, who knows them best, can offer what might be a more authentic type of personalisation in terms of help and support for things they find difficult.

One of the underlying drivers of schools putting on revision courses is a fear that if they do not, then they may have missed out on something that could make a positive, measurable difference to examination results. At Kite Hill, in my role as Headteacher, I put the learning of the girls first, trying always to structure additional help to support them in their own efforts to do well. However, the worry that my school might slip down the performance tables, if I fail to mobilize all available mechanisms for raising attainment, is ever present. One of the teacher interviewees was also aware of how the performativity agenda impacts on the work of colleagues outside of the classroom and said:

... it does concern me that leagues tables are ratcheting it up to the point where you do a bit more, then somebody else does even a bit more which puts you into the challenge where you have to do a bit more because you're worried that if you don't, your results might not be up to theirs and you're actually thinking, 'Oh my gosh, you know, can I take that risk because OFSTED might be round the corner to judge you and I don't like that at all ... .  
(Teacher A.E.)

The tension experienced by teachers between their desires to educate pupils in terms of what Midgley et al. describe as mastery goals, the acquisition, that is, of lasting skills such as thinking and creativity, and the pressure to deliver performance goals (examination scores) is also experienced in other countries such as the United States.

Rather than promoting thinking, understanding and creativity, they (teachers) feel pressured to teach facts and test-taking strategies. The state puts pressure on the district, the district puts pressure on principals, principals put pressure on teachers and teachers put pressure on students to demonstrate ability on these tests and to score better than others to look good in media accounts ... .  
(Midgley et al. 2000: 83)

Working as they are currently, in a performative and potentially punitive regime, schools are facing difficult ethical issues about which pupils should receive additional help and how that help might be provided. An example of

this could be choosing between a learner struggling with a difficult concept or one whose High Prior Attainment deems that they should be doing better than they currently are and whose underachievement will come under scrutiny during an OFSTED inspection.

Some of the Kite Hill teacher interviewees talked about the positive effect of intervention, not necessarily on the pupils' results but on their motivation. Having gathered in questionnaires from learners before they took part in a one-to-one tuition initiative and then again afterwards, the teacher noted a considerable difference in how they described their feelings about their studies. The teacher said:

... the difference it might have made is to their confidence with the subject, their happiness in their learning, their willingness to do their homework, um, I think that could also be part of it and I'm sure it is actually. Certainly from the one-to-one, um, questionnaires that students did – the way they described themselves before the one-to-one tuition, the words they would use were all really, really negative, um, whereas afterwards, they had a choice of words, you know, it was the same set of words before and after, and afterwards they would say they were happy, they, um, enjoyed it, um, so, you know, that was a measure but not necessarily a measure that makes a difference to some other people and external bodies.  
(Teacher of E.L.)

To effect an improvement in how pupils engage with their learning is important and, I would argue, exactly the sort of work that schools should be doing. The issue is, unfortunately, as described by this teacher, that when things are difficult to measure, it will be a struggle to convince those who make official judgments that a positive difference has indeed been made.

It could be argued that the pupils who reported feeling more positive about their learning were in a better long-term position than those for whom additional tuition resulted in last-minute improvements to their examination performance. Gains in positivity, motivation, confidence and engagement may well be benefits that sustain the learners better and for

longer than an increase in knowledge needed to achieve a particular grade. Superficial learning, the sort that results in this type of short-term gain, is often claimed by teachers to help pupils do well in high stakes tests, such as SATS, the 11+, GCSEs and A-Levels. However, they can then experience difficulties when they approach the next stage of their learning, their readiness for which evidenced only by the grade on the certificate. One of the Kite Hill teachers felt that to coach a pupil so that they could pass examinations was to render them a disservice. He said:

... if the support is getting them somewhere where they are able to be independent, truly independent, then that's great. If the support is actually allowing them to, in inverted commas, to achieve the levels or grades without the understanding, knowledge and skills which goes with that, then at some stage they are going to find they are not as well equipped as they thought they were. (Teacher A.Y.)

The focus in providing help and support for pupils so that it can be evidenced by better results is a consequence of the performativity regime. Ironically, however, this insistence on measurable outcomes could potentially be disadvantaging pupils by giving them, as described by Teacher AY, a sense of competence, but one built on very flimsy foundations.

What we have seen so far in the pupil and teacher responses is that when learners have good buy-in and a real desire to make progress in a subject, help and support are much more likely to have beneficial effects.

## **Conclusion**

Personalised intervention, in the form of additional help for particular pupils, is a key strategy for schools to try to meet externally set, government floor standards. Some pupils accept and respond positively to what they see as a type of unproblematic assistance that improves the standards they achieve. However, for others the offer of additional help is unwelcome, contributing towards feelings of disempowerment and a lack of competence on their part. A spontaneous offer of help from a teacher seemed, in the

learners' eyes to arise naturally from good pupil-teacher relationships, and was, therefore, more welcome than the more managerial and systematised intervention, which lacked authenticity and the human touch. Some teachers cast doubt on whether additional help and support is necessarily always a good thing for pupils to receive. Superficial gains in the sort of knowledge needed to attain particular grades in GCSE or A-level exams could cause pupils to acquire a false sense of security that would quickly become undermined once they move onto the next stage of their learning. Where help and support did appear to be of genuine assistance was when pupils understood that in addition to getting extra tuition, they too had to put in more work. Harder to evaluate, were the gains in confidence and willingness to engage in learning, that some reported as a result of being given one-to-one or small group additional teaching.

## **Chapter Seven** **Good teaching – an elusive concept?**

### **Introduction**

Personalising the learning of pupils and differentiating the content and delivery of lessons is currently presented, through official discourses, as part and parcel of good teaching. In this chapter I will consider some of the wider issues around what might be meant by this concept, looking at the official view as well as what some of the Kite Hill pupils said about their lessons. Tensions between competing views will be examined and the policy makers' characterization of good teaching as something to be adjusted and personalised in response to pupils' perceived needs or their membership of pre-determined groups, problematized.

What it is that constitutes good teaching is subject to competing discourses, ranging from the highly personal (e.g. a pupil commenting that she likes her French lessons because the teacher sings songs with the class) to the official, state-sponsored voice of OFSTED, which draws on a seemingly ever-widening range of activities that teachers are required to be seen doing in and outside of their classrooms. Whilst it is not, perhaps, surprising that a complex activity such as teaching should be open to different opinions, ideas and feelings, what is important is that these views do not just mirror or register different situations, they also reflect back on to those who are engaged in the activity, in this case the teachers, shaping and changing their working lives. In other words, using the language of post-structuralism, these discourses are constitutive of teachers' practice. As noted by Mills

Rather than seeing language as simply expressive, as transparent, as a vehicle of communication, as a form of representation, structuralist theorists and in turn, post-structuralists [see] language as a system with its own rules and constraints, and with its own determining effect on the way that individuals think and express themselves. (2004: 7)



A substantial body of research on performativity in education has shown that teachers may find, that in response to the OFSTED definitions of what good teaching should be, make changes to their pedagogy, prioritizing what is seen as important within the current climate of a mainly results driven agenda. Other changes can also take place, such as the way in which teachers understand their role. Whilst, for example, they may aim to position themselves as autonomous professionals, they discover that, due to increasing pressure from policy makers, their role requires them to become deliverers of a pre-determined educational package. The discourse of personalisation may further shape teachers' work in that it promotes adjusting the size and content of the package plus the methods by which it is to be taught, in order to meet the perceived needs of pupils.

For most secondary school children, the route that they might take in order to express their feelings about the quality of teaching in their school, is not an obvious one and whilst their views may well be sought on a range of other issues, often of a practical nature such as lockers and uniform, the core activities of the institution may be much more difficult to bring into the spotlight. Challenges such as the highly sensitive matter of asking pupils to 'rate' their teachers, mean that their views on what makes for good teaching may remain unexamined. My research at Kite Hill offered, I hope, a mechanism by which to give the pupil participants an opportunity to talk about the things that helped, in their opinion, to make good lessons. In doing so, I was interested in finding out what role, if any, discourses of personalisation played in their conceptualisation of good teaching.

Although the Department for Education's Teachers' Standards (see Chapter 4, p.61) list the things that a teacher should be doing in their classrooms, for example personalising the learning by differentiating work to suit the perceived needs of the pupils, there is currently no, and perhaps unsurprisingly, universally agreed definition of what exactly constitutes good teaching. Schools, through their performance management systems will try and define the elements of a 'good' or 'outstanding' lesson but this is not a straightforward thing to do. No matter how extensive the list of what

an observer might be able to see in a good lesson, there are still many challenges in trying to evaluate the quality of teaching. It is perfectly possible for a teacher to be observed doing everything that constitutes 'good' or 'outstanding' teaching as defined by the school, but whose pupils perform below their externally set targets in public examinations. The question then must be whether or not the judgment on the teaching remains valid; can teaching be considered 'good' if the pupils do badly in their assessments?

### **Good teaching – the inspectors' view**

OFSTED reports tend to couple good teaching with good attainment, a standpoint that has a degree of congruence if the yardstick to be used is pupils' success in high stakes public examinations. However, it is to be hoped that good teaching has a far greater worth and potentially much more life-long impact than can be evidenced simply by looking at GCSE or A-level results. It could also be the case that what would appear to be good teaching, i.e. that which enables pupils' success in assessments, engenders not only predominately superficial learning, but also leaves them with serious misconceptions.

This surprising and unexpected outcome of 'good' teaching was described by Schoenfeld, who, having observed high school Mathematics teaching over the course of a year, noticed that whilst the teacher's pedagogical approach was successful in securing good outcomes for the pupils in their public examinations, it also caused serious shortcomings in terms of developing their ability to grasp some of the deeper concepts, something that was crucial for them to be able to do when attempting to apply previously learned material to new situations and when tackling more challenging mathematical learning. In short, the teacher did everything that an observer would expect to see in a good lesson, but by privileging certain aspects of the curriculum, i.e. the things that were going to be tested, other very significant mathematical learning did not take place. Schoenfeld describes the situation like this:

The class was well managed and well taught, and the students did well on standard performance measures. Seen from this perspective, the class was quite successful. Yet from another perspective, the class was an important and illustrative failure. Schoenfeld (1988:145)

He then goes on to explain why the pupils in this ostensibly successful example of a well-taught class were, in many ways, disadvantaged by their experiences. It was because

Despite gaining proficiency at certain kinds of procedures, the students gained at best a fragmented sense of the subject matter and understood few if any of the connections that tie together the procedures that they had studied. More importantly, the students developed perspectives regarding the nature of mathematics that were not only inaccurate, but were likely to impede their acquisition and use of other mathematical knowledge. (ibid.: 145)

Returning to the almost unbreakable link that OFSTED inspectors construct between good teaching and good results in public examinations, Schoenfeld's work illustrates the inherent dangers in concluding that if the measurable outcomes are good, then the activity that caused those outcomes, i.e. the teaching, must also, *de facto*, be good.

Currently, OFSTED no longer give grades (Outstanding/ Good/ Requires Improvement/Inadequate) for individual lessons but continue to comment on the overall quality of teaching in a school. It is difficult to see how inspectors can arrive at a determination of the whole, without measuring the constitutional parts. It is suspected, however, that judgments about individual lessons are, in fact made, the only difference being that now, they are no longer shared with the teachers, who, under previous inspection frameworks would be asking, 'What did I get'? Hoping to have at least a brief meeting with the inspector, they would then be able to find out what grade they had been awarded for the observed lesson. The large and detailed amount of pupil performance data now available both publically and to the

OFSTED inspectors prior to their arrival at a school, may also be of significance in determining how the judgment on teaching will be made. Schools, for example, whose pupils fail to meet the Government floor standards are more likely to find that the teaching is graded as 'requiring improvement' than in institutions where pupils' examination grades are above them.

It might be reasonable to think that given OFSTED's power and, ultimately, its responsibility to improve standards in schools, it would also be the provider of some high-quality guidance for teachers in the classroom. This is, however, not the case. Indeed, the situation is quite the reverse in that OFSTED make it clear that it does not recommend any particular approach to teaching. The current Inspection Handbook states that:

Inspectors **must not** (original emboldening) advocate a particular method of planning, teaching or assessment. It is up to schools themselves to determine their practices and for leadership teams to justify these on their own merits rather than by reference to this inspection handbook. (OFSTED, 2015)

At first, this may seem like an official vote of confidence in the professionalism of the teachers and an indication that they are trusted to make good decisions regarding which pedagogical steps to take. Scratching beneath the surface a bit, however, and what we find in many of the OFSTED reports is an assembly of determinations that, in their totality, amount to retrospective judgments about what the teachers should or should not have been doing; in short, a diktat about how they should be teaching. Taking as an example, a recent report of a school graded as 'Inadequate' there are strong criticisms about the teaching. The opening 'Summary of key findings for parents and pupils' reads like this:

The quality of teaching is inadequate. Teachers' expectations of what students are able to achieve are too low.'

There is then the further comment that:

Students lack enthusiasm in lessons. They comply with their teachers' instructions but are uninspired by the quality of teaching that they receive. Students' work is often poorly presented or unfinished. Teachers do not demand high enough standards. (OFSTED Report 21-22 January 2105, The City Academy Bristol)

The over-simplistic quasi-instruction here is that the teachers need only to have higher expectations in order for things to be better. What is implied is that good teaching cannot be happening at the school; if it were, inspectors would be able to see evidence of it in terms of the teachers demonstrating their high expectations. Just as an assessor of a motor vehicle might want to see visible evidence regarding the quality of, for example, the brakes, it seems to be increasingly the case that unless school inspectors can see evidence of teacher behaviour, which, in their opinion is concomitant with 'good' teaching, the judgment will be one that describes the school as having fallen short of the mark. As such, teachers find themselves in a type of no man's land: on the face of it enabled to exercise their professionalism, but in reality, judged to be teaching badly if the standards achieved by their pupils are too low.

Looking now more directly at how personalised learning is considered by OFSTED, we should first remind ourselves that inspectors are said not to be looking for any particular style of teaching (OFSTED Handbook, 2015). Examining a number of recent OFSTED reports, the phrase 'personalised learning' is not mentioned directly, but in the same way that teachers' apparently low expectations at the City Academy Bristol were noted and presumed to be part of the reason for the low standards of pupil achievement, the way that teachers approached their lessons at the Co-operative Academy in Leeds is also deemed to be faulty. The problem, from the standpoint of the inspectors, is that teachers are not providing work that is sufficiently personalised and is one of the reasons that the school 'requires improvement'. The report states that:

Too many teachers are planning the same work for all of the pupils in their class, leading to some finding the work too hard and others finding

it too easy. (OFSTED Report, The Co-Operative Academy of Leeds, 20-21 September, 2016)

Whilst the provision of different work for different groups of pupils may seem a relatively straightforward pedagogical technique, and one that might be required for OFSTED inspectors, we have already looked at how this plays out in the classroom and how it comes to be interpreted by pupils. In the next section we shall see how challenging this can be for the teacher.

### **Teaching – a complex and highly demanding activity**

There remains, then, an on-going debate about exactly what constitutes good teaching and rather obstinately, it continues to defy the neat, reproducible formula so longed for by the policy makers. Teaching is a complex and demanding activity and the sheer amount of work ahead of a teacher in the course of a lesson is quite breathtaking. In a typical secondary school, the teachers will be engaged in the type of tasks and behaviours described in the following paragraph.

Firstly a clear plan of the activities that the children will be doing must be made and committed at least to the teachers' memory but at times, a piece of paper too. During the entry to the classroom, good order must be maintained and any disputes or ongoing quarrels spilling over from the last lesson or the corridor, dealt with. Forgotten homework, missing books, lost pencil cases or anybody not feeling well may also require some swift adult attention. Seating arrangements must be sorted, the register taken and the lesson started. An interesting and engaging opening explanation is required if some of the 32 pupils are not to 'switch off' before even the first ten minutes have gone by. Individual and group activities will follow with care taken to group the pupils so that the more confident ones do not dominate the quieter members of the class. Some learners will catch on very quickly and race through the tasks whilst others will find things more difficult. Thought will have to be given to how the different externally categorised groups – the 'Most Able', those with 'Low Prior Attainment', those for whom the school receives the Pupil Premium, the learners with Special Educational

Needs and those who have English as a second language are faring. In addition to these 'official groups', there are also other children, who may need additional support and attention because they are experiencing problems at home, have health issues or friendship difficulties. In some schools there will also be children recently arrived from war torn countries, traumatised and attempting to come to terms with their life-changing experiences.

The teacher will be trying to get to know the pupils in the sense of who is confident, who is withdrawn, who talks too much or too little and who might dominate, if given the chance. Further explanations, encouragement, reassurance, checks to off-task behaviour (which could range from low level interruptions to highly disruptive activities), and answers to questions must all be undertaken by the teacher 'on the fly' whilst continuing to teach the subject content of the lesson. Homework will then be set, books taken in, and/or given out plus, in a practical lesson, apparatus tidied away. Then when this is all done, the 32 pupils leave and another 32 take their place, a pattern which, in a full teaching day, will be repeated another four times. In a five period day, a teacher could have contact with at least 150 children all with their own needs, aspirations, likes, dislikes, feelings, fears, challenges, triumphs and hopes.

It could be argued that within the scenario above there are several examples of personalised learning in action; the teacher getting to know the pupils, making adaptations to her/his explanations, and offering support in response to the different rates of learners' progress. It would seem, however, that this approach is insufficient to satisfy the requirements of OFSTED inspectors, who require 'proof' of personalised learning by seeing the teacher deliver it in a highly visible way, i.e. different levels of work for different members of the class. This is an example of what Ball (2003) refers to as 'exteriorization', the requirement for public sector workers to make their professional practice visible and auditable.

## **Good teaching - the pupils' perspective**

The Kite Hill pupil interviewees were asked about what they thought made a good lesson and their very varied responses reflect the enormous number of elements that constitute teaching and learning. For several pupils it was the atmosphere of the classroom that was important; what they valued was the way the teacher was able to create an ethos in which the learners felt encouraged and inspired, comfortable and happy. One pupil used the word 'fun' to describe her English lessons and was clear as to who had made this pleasant environment possible.

**L.C.** So, can you describe the best lesson you've had?

**E.** What, ever?

**L.C.** Yes, could be ever. Yeah.

**E.** Um, I don't know. Probably English lessons – um, they were really fun in Year 11. Even, like, analyzing the boring stuff was good fun.

**L.C.** What made it fun?

**E.** The teacher.

When asked to say what exactly the teacher had done to make the lessons so enjoyable, Elena said:

... she was just really – she had a good personality, she was excited to be teaching us, she said we were her favourite class, so, yeah, we all had fun in the lesson and even if we sort of messed around and laughed a bit, she would laugh with us and then we'd get back to the lesson and stuff. (Elena, Year 12)

One of the Year 13 pupils also spoke about the atmosphere in the classroom as an important part of learning. She said that she liked lessons the best when:

... it's like a good class, 'cos then you can, like, joke with your friends as well, but, like, still doing work. (Jamie, Year 13)

The concept of a 'good' class is difficult to unpick as it is likely that what is 'good' for some pupils is not for others. A universal and dependable



definition of 'good', in relation to lessons is currently out of reach, but this does not make any less real the importance of certain aspects of lessons from the learners' perspective. Perhaps what Jamie was alluding to was the fact that some of her teachers were able to give pupils a degree of freedom, such as having a joke with friends, without compromising on the pace and progress of the learning. As a Year 13 student, Jamie would have had lots of experience in being a pupil and could perhaps recall lessons where things were not so 'good' and either the teacher was unable to offer opportunities to lighten the atmosphere or where laughing and joking was a harbinger of the breakdown of order and the slippage of control out of the teacher's hands. She went on to add the following comment:

I don't really have a problem with doing any of the work in lessons, I just prefer it when it's a nicer environment to do the work in. (Jamie, Year 13)

Other pupils said that there were particular things they had enjoyed doing in class, often describing hands-on, practical activities. For some pupils, this type of classroom task brought the learning to life and helped make concepts more concrete, such as described by one of the Year 12s:

... in PE the other day, we went and filmed different people and it was good because you could, like, see what you were doing and how it related to the type of topic you were talking about. (Keonah, Year 12)

Another Year 12 pupil felt that the interactive learning that she had experienced in her History GCSE course had made the lesson very successful. She noted that the things she had learnt, in this practical way, were so memorable that she was still able to recall some of it over a year later. She said:

... it was about medicine ... and we did Galen ... and I remember some of the facts we learnt from that lesson now, even though I'm doing A-Level now, so I think that was the best lesson ever. We had slips and we had facts on them and we had to – we had to go round – and we had questions and answers on the back – and we had to go round and ask each other questions ... and that way we learnt better and it was

more memorable. (Yasira, Year 12)

However, other pupils were not so fond of practical activities and felt that they preferred a more direct way of learning, with the lesson content imparted in a straightforward, instructional manner. One girl explained it like this:

The best type of lessons, um, I like lessons which - I like making notes and I like there being, um, a power point which kind of says things in a, sort of, nice, sort of, concise way, which is - sort of, not loads to write down but enough that you get a really good understanding of what's going on ... .

When asked if she could say more precisely why she preferred this type of teaching and learning she went on to say:

... I think I just - I concentrate a bit more, I think, um, and when asked to do things like posters and group work, sometimes it can get a bit sort, sort of, distracted ... . (Karly, Year 13)

It is noteworthy that Karly says, 'it' can get a bit distracted, rather than 'I', referring perhaps to the challenge teachers have in terms of keeping all group members on task when pupils are working collaboratively. Her comments also relate to a bigger issue in terms of what we see in schools with regard to the various trends that come in (and go out) of fashion, often hastily implemented to satisfy the requirements of policy makers. Having pupils working primarily in groups is one such example and some teachers will be able to recall a time when an absence of group working could have been a factor in receiving criticism from external agencies, such as OFSTED. For example, a school inspected in 1999 received the following comment in their report:

Pupils speak with some confidence and clarity but discussion skills are less well-developed because of the limited opportunities for small group work provided. (OFSTED Report, Barclay School, 6<sup>th</sup> December 1999)

For some of the Kite Hill girls, it was the interactions between the teachers and their pupils and between the pupils themselves that was seen as of

particular importance. One of the Year 12s described how much she had valued the fact that her teacher had shown interest in, and taken seriously her desire to explore a scientific topic in more depth.

... the fact that he, um, like, properly listened to my question and, like, gave me, like, proper feedback and understood that I actually really wanted to, like, learn it, um, like, it felt really nice ... and it really helped me, like, to stay interested in the subject further on because after that I was really, like, engaged in it properly, um, so that was really lovely ... . (Joni, Year 12)

This scenario, described by Joni, can be seen as a type of authentic personalisation of learning, in that the teacher responded to her being keen to find out more about a particular aspect of the curriculum – in short, a genuine connection between the needs of the pupil and the professionalism of the teacher.

Some pupils felt that good lessons came about as a result of special activities that the teacher arranged for the class, such as the Year 12 pupil who was highly appreciative of her Business Studies teacher, who invited in her brother to talk about his experiences of setting up a business. This, she explained, made the lesson a particularly good one, because it was valuable to be able to ask questions of someone who was actually doing the things the class had learnt about.

Another Year 12 used the example of her Geography teacher who made the learning particularly successful by her style of teaching, which was characterized by a slow pace. Ellesse explained that she felt this approach helped to make the subject content easier to understand. She said:

... um, it's probably Geography with Mrs A.  
I don't know why, just everything makes sense  
whenever she'd – like what – the way she says it,  
or dunno, what the word is, but it just makes sense  
because she just goes through it slowly. (Ellesse, Year 12)

The fear of not being able to understand what it is they have to do in class is a seriously inhibiting factor for some learners. Clearly, for Ellesse, the thing

that made a difference to her learning was the fact that the teacher went slowly through the work, which reduced the risk of her being unable to undertake the tasks.

Being engaged in the lesson by moving around the classroom was important for some of the pupil interviewees and one of the Year 12s was able to describe the activities that she found most interesting. She said:

The best lesson I've ever had – um, probably a lesson where – an interactive lesson where we're going up to the whiteboard and writing stuff on it ...'. (Esther, Year 12)

However, the prospect and the importance of the exams were not far from Esther's thoughts as she also added:

I also like going back over things, so things that I might have missed, um, it's just a sense that, um, I know what I'm – the information I'm getting is – I'm getting everything ready for my exam – it just kind of puts me at ease, so that's why I enjoy lessons like that, it seems a bit silly but ...'. (Esther, Year 12)

Given the importance assigned to the public examinations by just about everyone around her, it is hardly surprising that Esther valued the opportunity to revise work with her teachers. The utterance at the end, where she breaks off after saying, 'it seems a bit silly' might suggest that she is almost bashful about 'admitting' she likes revision lessons and that she should perhaps be reserving her appreciation for lessons where new and exciting things are taught. Perhaps Esther's words about revision lessons are best seen in the context of a pupil who is worried about exams and who takes comfort in the provision of teaching which ensures that nothing is left out from the exam syllabus and will be primarily focused on ensuring a good GCSE or A-Level grade.

For one of the Year 13 pupils, the important thing was not so much the content of the lesson, or the activities given to the pupils, but her perception

of how the teacher distributed her attention amongst the members of the class. She explained how in Drama:

... everyone was getting equal kind of treatment, so she'd go round each group and spend, kind of, the same amount of time with them whilst we were doing our pieces, whereas in some of the other lessons, you know, you wouldn't quite have that equal throughout all the people. (Eliza, Year 13)

Eliza was clearly appreciative of what she saw as the fair and equitable approach taken by her Drama teacher and considered that it was in contrast to what she had experienced in other lessons. For Eliza, being treated differently was something that she had had previous experience of, and was therefore particularly aware of the fact that her Drama teacher gave everybody the same amount of attention. Eliza explained that, because of the difficulties she was having in another subject, the teachers had tried to give her extra help outside of the formal teaching time rather than in the lesson. This made her feel that whilst others got attention in the class, she did not, which led her to feel that she was failing.

It felt as though, it was, kind of, a lot less attention in the lesson ... whilst everyone else was in the class, kind of, getting the attention ... I felt I was treated as like the worst in the class. (Eliza, Year 13)

This comment shows how difficult it can be to try and personalise learning by means of chopping education up into portions of varying sizes and types in the attempt to match the provision to the needs of the learner. In Eliza's case it went wrong and the very thing that purported to 'meet her needs' and, as such, give her a more personalised and fulfilling experience, did absolutely the opposite. After feeling isolated and exposed, she decided not to continue studying that subject.

Learning can be an exciting and exhilarating experience and one of the Kite Hill pupils described how her best lessons were when she could become involved in discussing things that were important to her. This happened in her RE lessons where she enjoyed the lively debates. She said:

... I tend to get really, really into them and we used

to have some really, like, clashing views in the class, I mean me and my friend S were always really sort of, like, pro, sort of, God and Christianity, so any sort of religious arguments – but then one of my best – my two best friends were very atheist, so we would have these, sort of, quite sort of fiery discussions in class and I loved them, they make you feel quite – getting it all out and having your views – and yeah, I really enjoy that ... . (Nastasia, Year 13)

In Government policy papers the pupil is sometimes cast as a type of passive receptacle into which knowledge and skills can be poured, the emphasis being very much on the outcomes, as illustrated by a recent speech given by Nicky Morgan, the then Secretary of State for Education. In the section entitled ‘Outcomes focused’, she said:

We want our schools to produce knowledgeable, skilled and confident young people and we should hold schools to account for getting them there.  
(Nicky Morgan, speech, March 2016)

The word ‘produce’ evokes processes and behaviours more suited to an industrial setting where it would be right and proper to view the end result as products.

Nastasia’s comments, on the other hand, remind us about the human side of learning and strike, I think, to the very heart of education as something deeply life affirming, empowering and potentially transformative.

One of the Year 12 pupils, when asked about her best lesson, stated at first that she found the question difficult and then went on to describe a really important part of teaching and learning. She said:

I think the lessons that I really enjoy are the ones that I learn something that I sort of have a grasp on, but not to the detail I expected to, so, like I did GCSE Chemistry and I understood it, but the fact that now we’re getting into the detail of it, it really interests me and it’s something like when it all clicks together – that sort of lesson is the best for me. (Kyna, Year 12)

For a classroom teacher, the 'clicking together' that Kyna describes is the point at which the knowledge and skills that are being taught come to be owned by the pupil and transcend from an assembly of facts to something well understood by the learner. The challenge for the teacher is to be able to gauge what the pupils already know and teach them the 'next bit' so that progress can be made. In this way, the teacher uses her/ his professional judgment and training to help adapt, shape and personalise the pupils' learning in a sensitive, dynamic and genuine way.

Several interviewees said how important it was for the teachers to get to know how their pupils preferred to learn. For one of the Year 12s this was a particularly important part of what constituted good teaching and she perceived there to be a big difference between the teachers who had succeeded in understanding the way in which she liked to learn and express herself and those who had not. She said:

Like, in my old school, with my Law teacher and my Business teacher, like, we would – they know exactly how I learn, like, especially them two teachers exactly, like, they knew exactly how I learn and how I'm – how I take things in and how I answer questions. Like, I do a lot with hand gestures and I just expect them to understand what I'm saying and them two teachers do and the rest of the teachers are looking at me – like, what does she mean?

The same pupil went on to develop her point and said:

... the teacher needs to understand the student and individually how the student learns and, like, change – not exactly themselves, but, you know, alter themselves so that they know the students are getting a better education and they're taking everything in – better than just talking to them and them not understanding.  
(Zaara, Year 12)

Another pupil echoed these sentiments, describing how much she appreciated being taught by a teacher who had got to know her as an individual and could explain things accordingly; an example, I think, of authentic personalisation in which the teacher was able to find out how best

to connect with the pupil and explain the subject content so that Ellesse felt confident in her own ability to learn. She said:

Like, I find that a teacher who I've maybe had before or knows, like, the way I learn, I find it easier to, like, work with them because they know the best way to explain it to me personally, but if it's a new teacher who's new to the school or I've never been taught by before, it's very difficult because obviously they don't know the I way I learn.  
(Ellesse, Year 12)

In complete contrast to how secure and confident Zaara and Ellesse felt with the teachers who had got to know them well - arguably an important aspect of personalisation - was Keonah, who described how, at times, the approach taken by the teacher did not seem to be well matched to some of the pupils' dispositions. For example, she said that some learners find being asked individual questions an uncomfortable and disempowering experience, whereas for others, this is something they really like. She explained it like this:

Some people don't like individual, like silence - they struggle, they can't - they just sit there looking at the page and they can't do it - and then some love it - so it's a bit hard to - some people feel like they're, kind of - not being singled out but sort of, it's not really suited to them and they just stay there, like, looking at the page not understanding what to do ... (Keonah Year 12)

This statement shines a light on the complex skill set needed by teachers, who, in order to bring out the best in all their pupils must find ways to offer just the right amount of challenge and support to each one, in other words personalising the approach they take to their learners so that it is authentic, human and responsive.

The teachers' role extends far beyond the classroom and the pupil interviewees were keen to give examples of how they had been offered support and, at times, some 'tough love' in order to help get them through difficult patches. One of the Year 12 interviewees remembered how her friend had been struggling when she was in Year 11, remembering that



... she doubted herself so much

but that the teacher

... helped her through it all and like, she looked at Miss P like she was her mum, sort of thing, helping her through it ... Miss P was like, she was like, 'Can I go home' and Miss P was like, 'No, come on come on, you can do this' and then actually made her do the work. (Elexis, Year 12)

Another pupil talked about how good it was that teachers were prepared to offer their help outside of the classroom and gave the example of a friend who was struggling with Mathematics.

... she's definitely getting help, like, spends time with the teachers outside of lessons and stuff and they're all willing to help, so it – they compensate for the fact that it is so difficult. (Kyna, Year 12)

What Kyna says here is significant not only in terms of her acknowledgement of the helpfulness of her teachers, but in the sense that she can see clearly the connection between the needs of her friend and the teacher's response. We looked at the ways in which help and support are currently characterized in English schools in Chapter 6, and know that there are times when pupils are reluctant to engage with the proffered help because they suspect a lack of authenticity in the offer. Kyna's comment is an illustration of how pupils appreciate the teacher's help when they can see that it is rooted in their genuine understanding of a learner's personal struggle with a new and difficult topic.

Judging the quality of teaching is highly problematic, as shown, at least in part, by the wide range of things mentioned by the pupil interviewees, which, in their view, helped them learn well. Not only do we have competing views of what good teaching is emanating from different stakeholders, we also have widely differing views from just one group, i.e. the learners. For some pupils the experience of good teaching was characterized by lots of hands-on, practical activities whilst for others, what they considered to be

good teaching was in lessons where lots of information was presented in a straightforward manner.

In the next section I will move from what pupils understand to be good teaching to look at how policy makers and regulatory bodies continue their efforts to bring to life a reliable and replicable definition.

### **Good teaching - external mandates and judgments**

The classroom practices of teachers have, over at least two decades, been subject to powerful influences in terms of the implementation of policies from central government. In 2004 we saw the introduction of the 'Every Child Matters' initiative in which one of the strands was entitled, 'Enjoy and Achieve'. Schools were then required to place an emphasis on promoting the enjoyment aspect of learning to show that this part of the policy was being implemented. Making visible what would normally just be a routine part of a lesson causes a distortion in the teachers' practice, which is one of the key problems when policy makers seek to change what happens in the classroom. The decisions about what is really important in a particular lesson are taken out of the teacher's hands because she/he is aware that inspectors are looking for something particular. A failure to make whatever the current trend is very easy to see, could mean a poor outcome in the inspection, the consequences of which have already been described.

When the trend was to make explicit 'lesson objectives', any teacher failing to write the objectives on the board within the first few minutes of the lesson would be cast as an ineffective practitioner. There were, and are, perfectly good reasons why a teacher might wish not to share the objectives of the lesson with the pupils. For example, she/he might want to surprise them with something unexpected, or allow the direction of the lesson to become part of a journey of discovery. However, because policy makers had declared that good teaching was characterized by the sharing of lesson objectives, teachers up and down the country were required to change what they were doing whether or not they thought it was a good idea. As noted by

Nuthall, there are real dangers both in assuming that teaching can be judged by an observer in the classroom, and in the adoption of particular teaching 'methods'. He explains that:

Many of the quality assurance systems used to evaluate teachers are based on the belief that we can tell by looking whether the teaching is effective and that students are learning. But research suggests that there are serious problems with this approach. First, this tactic tends to be strongly influenced by current fashions in teaching. If we believe that teachers should have their students working in small groups in their classrooms, we give high ratings to those teachers who are using group work. If we believe that students should do most of the talking and the teacher should talk relatively little, we are impressed by the classrooms where this occurs. (Nuthall, 2007: 25)

Also, Burton makes the point that teaching and learning in schools have been subjected to many influences from Government policy makers who try to shape classroom practices through the introduction of what she calls 'psycho-pedagogy', listing the many trends that schools have been required to embrace, personalised learning being just one of them. The list is long and includes

... metacognition, multiple forms of intelligence, learning styles, learning preferences, thinking skills, brain functioning, emotional intelligence and neuro-linguistic programming. (Burton, 2007: 5)

She also states that:

... sound bites become accepted into the educational lexicon, having been used in ministers' speeches or government documents without anyone sharing an understanding of what they mean, much less a knowledge of their research basis (ibid.: 5)

Bartlett et al. (1992) claim that policy makers use a particularly persuasive technique to give their texts credibility and give the example of a piece of writing where:

... each section of the text traverses the same terrain, but in increasing detail, so that by the end of the Report we are so familiar with its features that it assumes a necessary and material presence. (ibid.: 24)

Both Burton and Bartlett are describing the ways in which policy makers are able to give their chosen discourses a style of delivery which powerfully transforms ideas into mandates requiring action by those working at grass roots level, in this instance, teachers in state schools. A current example of this is the 2016 Education White Paper, which, although describing at the start how schools must make their own decisions regarding approaches to pedagogy, then refers to something called, 'mastery teaching'. It states that:

According to the EEF (Education Endowment Foundation), the use of mastery teaching methods, for example, can lead to an additional five months' progress over the course of a school year compared with mainstream approaches. (DFE White Paper, 2016: 38)

Using my own experience of four OFSTED inspections in three schools, I could offer a prediction as to how this reference to 'mastery teaching' might be played out. Particularly in the case of schools not meeting Government floor standards, comments from the visiting inspectors might well make reference to those institutions having failed to implement 'mastery teaching' as a contributory factor to the 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate' judgment.

We know that high levels of performativity and accountability can drive teachers' work so that it primarily focuses on covering the prescribed syllabus and ensuring that pupils are well prepared for their assessments. Looking back over my own teaching experience that extends back to a time before the establishment of either OFSTED or the league tables, I can vividly recall teaching a Year 10 class the entire scheme of work in just one year, entering the pupils early for their French GCSE examinations and using the Year 11 time to write, rehearse and perform a satirical version of *Blanche Neige*. Contrasting this freedom that I enjoyed with the tight constraints on today's teachers, it is, I think, fair to say, that poor Snow White is now deceased.

Whilst, of course, there will always be the element of the ‘eye of the beholder’ in any judgment, the fact remains that teaching a class is a highly complex activity which is not easily broken down into formulaic, replicable procedures. Teachers’ classroom practices evolve as they become more familiar with the subject matter and with the dynamics in each of their classes. It is not simply the case that by doing *x* rather than *y*, teaching will be improved. Whilst it is, without doubt, desirable for a teacher to be able to keep good order in their classrooms, know their subject well and be able to explain things clearly, to go beyond these basic building blocks and apply prescriptive solutions to improving teaching, is probably a futile exercise.

### **The human side of teaching and learning**

Although the Kite Hill pupils talked about a wide variety of things that they liked about their lessons, what featured quite often in their responses was their appreciation of the people who taught them. Many held their teachers in high regard and were very appreciative of their help and support. Policy makers tend to emphasise the performative aspects of teaching, with the ‘good’ teacher positioned as a fairly dispassionate individual, someone who ensures good outcomes for their learners as measured primarily by attainment in high-stakes public examinations. As noted in the 2016 Education White Paper,

... schools should be held to account primarily  
for the outcomes their pupils achieve.  
(DFE White Paper, 2016: 109)

The pupils, however, spoke much more about the human side of teaching and learning, especially in terms of how important it is that teachers get to know them, have a good understanding of their potential and the way in which they learn best.

As an experienced Headteacher who, every year, welcomes trainee and newly qualified teachers into the school, I tell them that most of what they are going to try and do will, in the end, come down to the quality of the relationships that they are able to build with their pupils, the parents and

other stakeholders. I also share with them my favourite quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, i.e., 'Le plus beau métier d'homme est le métier d'unir les hommes', (Le Figaro, 2015) the idea being that if, as a teacher, you can help those around you to unite and work together, teaching and learning will be built on firm foundations.

Very few of the Kite Hill pupils were overtly critical of their teachers but there were a few comments about things, that in the pupil's view, teachers should avoid doing. One of the Y12 interviewees stated that, in her opinion,

... the teachers shouldn't just read out of textbooks.

The interview then continued like this:

**K.**... one of my teachers, she sits there in the middle of the class and just reads the text book and then five minutes before the bell goes, we have to answer questions, but it means you are so bored – 'cos you don't read it because she's reading it – you don't take it in – it's not good!

**L.C.** Have you been able to communicate this?

**K.** I don't want to because I feel, like, she's the teacher I don't wanna like – I don't know what the word is, but – take that away from her and say, 'I don't like the way you're doing it.'

**L.C.** Maybe she'll change, maybe this is just how she does it at the moment.

**K.** She's a new teacher. So it could be a bit of a, like, learning curve.

**L.C.** It could. Thank you for that.

Keonah's obvious respect for her teacher, in spite of the fact she did not currently like some of the classroom activities, together with the acceptance that new teachers sometimes have to learn different ways to approach their pedagogy, illustrates, I think, the importance of the pupil-teacher relationship and the extent to which learners appreciate the teachers' efforts even when the teaching is not altogether to their liking.

What I think we are seeing through the views of the pupils is the sense that learning is something that can be personalised, but by means of the teacher getting to know the learners and trying to adapt their explanations, rather

than by distributing sufficient knowledge so as to bring about the attainment of particular grades by particular pupils.

A Year 12 pupil went on to say more about how, in her opinion, teachers are crucial in terms of helping pupils to achieve their potential through encouragement and their own passion for their subject. She said:

... if the teacher encourages you and makes you enthusiastic about the subject you just go home and it's not a chore to do it it's just like you enjoy. Like, R.E. last year was my favourite subject, by far, just 'cos of Miss Z. She was amazing within the subject – she talked about the subject like it was, like, her best friend ... . (Elexis, Year 12)

Another pupil spoke enthusiastically about the work teachers do, not just in teaching their subject, but in getting to know the pupils and finding out which ones need extra encouragement.

... they try to sometimes push some students to do well – because they need some of that push, it's not like they don't need some of that push – because they know that the student can do it, so they push it a bit, so they talk to them. The teacher knows that the student can do better than what they've done, so they go and talk to them ... . (Taavi, Year 12)

This warm, human side of teaching and learning, where teachers show passion for their subjects, get to know their pupils, encourage them and help them through difficult patches could be described, I think, as a truly personalised approach to educating a child in that it does indeed centre on the person. It also, however, stands at odds with the highly mechanistic judging, grading, quantifying and comparing of schools and pupils undertaken by agencies such as OFSTED, where the individual person risks being lost amidst the tables, percentages and calculations.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I looked at how difficult it is to define good teaching. I considered both the official discourses and the pupils' contributions in terms of what they described as helpful for their learning. We looked at

OFSTED judgements on what constitutes good teaching and where personalised learning sits within them. A different concept of personalised learning was also offered, i.e. something that emerges quite naturally from good classroom relationships and the teachers' knowledge about those whom they are teaching; not in terms of pre-set definitions, but as individuals with their own aspirations, feelings, personalities, likes and dislikes. This chapter also showed how, for the pupils, 'good teaching' and 'the good teacher' became closely aligned, with appreciation being registered for teachers who share a passion for their subject as well as those who can form a genuine connection with their learners through their ability to encourage and support.



**Introduction**

It is not unusual both in my school and in schools I visit, to hear teachers saying that pupils today are often quite passive in class and lack independence; discussions with colleagues reveal a feeling that, because so much of what happens in schools is focused on doing well in examinations, some pupils adopt an instrumental stance towards their learning, enquiring of their teachers, for example, whether certain parts of the lesson 'will be needed' for the exam. The drive towards personalising their learning, in the sense of teaching them the required amount of knowledge to achieve externally set targets, can mean that the natural inquisitiveness of children becomes displaced by a tendency towards them asking, for example, what it is that needs to be done in order to secure their target grade.

In this chapter I will look at some of the ways in which pupils exercise their agency and take responsibility for their own learning. We begin to understand that this is not an easy thing for them to do, given that many of the systems and processes in English schools effectively hem the learner into tight paths and leave little space for them to exercise choice or develop autonomy.

**Performativity and Passivity**

Whilst schools try to teach a broad curriculum and encourage pupils to read around the subject - bearing in mind that learning resources have never before been so plentiful - what can actually happen is that teachers find themselves limiting the breadth of what is taught and focusing primarily on what pupils must do to get their target grades (see, for example, Bevertson et al. (2005) and Stobart (2008)). There will perhaps always be a tension between what teachers want to do in terms of helping pupils broaden their horizons, and what they feel pressurized into doing given that their very employment could suffer as a result of a their pupils failing to achieve the

expected outcomes. In such a highly performative arena, pupils may come to depend heavily on the teacher to explain what knowledge and skills need to be acquired for the high-stakes examinations on which so much of what they can and cannot do next (entry to A-Level courses, for example) depends. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) also make the point that nearly the entire achievement machinery in schools positions the pupil as passive recipients of what others have decided both about them, in terms of their ability for example, and what should or should not be offered to them. As noted by Quicke and Winter (1994), pupils' agency is reflected back and forth between what they experience in schools and how they make sense of it. These researchers undertook a study into how learners might be enabled to exercise more autonomy in their learning and make the point that,

... there is an interaction between the developing agent and the intellectual traditions which constitute their knowledge. (ibid.: 430)

Looked at like this, pupils in English schools today have, as their 'intellectual traditions', schemata primarily composed of measurements, checks, success, failure and the meeting of targets, rather than an introduction into the rich, exciting and thought-provoking world of knowledge, concepts and experiences. The opportunities for pupils to enjoy creative and engaging opportunities may now be more limited and it could be expected that they will come to see themselves as, in the main, recipients of what it is they might need to do to be successful, such as gain information from their teachers about what should be written on the examination paper so as to secure the higher grades.

### **The Views of the Pupils**

Given that Kite Hill pupils are helped and supported more than ever before, and that their learning is being personalised, to large extent without any input from them, it might be reasonable to hypothesise that there could be widespread passivity spreading amongst the pupils as they wait, like expectant baby birds, for the next dose of pre-digested learning. It is not

uncommon to hear teachers complain that their pupils lack independence, the concern being that, as so much of the responsibility for good outcomes now rests with the teacher, the pupil may begin to relinquish responsibility for trying to achieve the results that they want to get. It was encouraging, therefore, to hear directly from the pupils that they did not think their future success was all down to the teacher. One of the Year 12s, for example, reflected that there were things she could do to make better progress. She said:

... for homework, I think it's quite a lot, so it's quite hard to keep up with, but I think that's partly my fault because I should manage my time better ... . (Yasira, Year 12)

Several other Kite Hill pupil interviewees also showed that they were far from passive recipients of facts and information and had thought a lot about how they could take more responsibility for their learning. One of the Year 12 pupils explained how she had come to recognize that there were some areas in English that she needed to improve on and had worked hard to do just that. She explained that:

... in English I worked on my paragraph structure and I kept doing it and doing it ... . (Keonah, Year 12)

For Elena, it was a case of her either finding more out about the subject if she thought the work was too easy or going to find the teacher or a classmate if she found things difficult to understand. She explained that:

If it's a bit easy, I'll probably go away and do some extra research on the topic just to make my understanding a bit clearer and if it's too hard, go to the teacher and ask them what I need to do or look for someone in my class. (Elena, Year 12)

Siobhan spoke about what she thought pupils should be doing to make sure they really understand the work. It wasn't just about getting a teacher to go over it with you, but making sure, she said, that you go through the work yourself. She said:

If you ... go home and go over what you've done and

then do questions ... and, like – and make sure you understand, then I think that will help you because you're utilising what you've learnt ... . (Siobhan, Year 12)

This pupil also showed considerable resourcefulness in that she would not only approach teachers for help, but other pupils too. She said:

... and also students which you might think are doing really well in class, you can go up to them and ask them for help ... . (Siobhan, Year 12)

Zaara, another of the Year 12 girls, explained how she and her friend had developed a helpful strategy in their Mathematics lesson as shown in the following extract from her interview.

**Z.** Um in Maths, I sit with S, um, me and her are literally at the same level, so even if we find something hard we'll work it out together and then next to us are two girls and they know it all, so we'll ask them if we're stuck.

**L.C.** How do you know they know it all?

**Z.** Because they always answer the questions straight and we sit there for, you know, a couple of minutes just looking at each other, like, what do we do? And then we'll ask them and then if they're still, like, not sure, we'll ask Mrs. W.

This pupil saw for herself that she needed to find a way forward in terms of making better progress in Mathematics. This important type of realization and self-reflection may be something that schools are unwittingly preventing pupils from experiencing; in having tasks and questions personalised for them, but in as subtle a way as possible, the learners may not realize that they are having any difficulties with the work. As we saw in Chapter 4, teachers often try to disguise worksheets that have been modified and 'soften the blow' when discussions are being had about entry to lower tier public examinations. In doing these things, teachers are offering protection from the potential damage to pupils' self-esteem, but what might also be happening is that the teachers' attempts at disguising what could be called an 'educational truth' are so successful as to prevent

the pupil from seeing that actually, they do need to put more effort into their work and/or receive extra support.

As we see from the comments of the following pupils, there was, in spite of the many processes and systems that could potentially disenable the learner, evidence that a high proportion of the Kite Hill pupil interviewees were prepared to take responsibility for their learning and reject, to some extent, the more passive role that the performative agenda could position them in.

Several of the Kite Hill pupils were in no doubt whatsoever that unless they were prepared to go home and try to do the work themselves, it was unlikely that things the school might do, such as offer extra help, would make any difference. As was clearly explained by one pupil:

... you can get extra help but you have to put the effort in yourself. So, the teacher can't be in your exam doing the exam with you so no matter how much information they give or they help you in class, you still need to go and learn it yourself ... .  
(Sakinah, Year 12)

In a similar vein, another pupil said:

Yeah, I mean there's only so much, I think, the school and revision can do for you – it's more, they – you know, they can't give you, um, a sort of definitive answer to anything, but they can give you the tools to answer questions ... if you can learn how to utilize them ... then ultimately, it's up to the student. (Nastasia Year 13)

Another Year 12 interviewee was very clear about what she thought pupils should be responsible for.

I think that with regards to progress, that, um, generally, it's the pupils' responsibility to make sure that they are progressing in the right way, so if they are not doing as well as they should, they should take it upon themselves to seek out that help, um, it doesn't necessarily need to be the teachers' responsibility. I think again, that's

something that you grasp as you get older, so for example, people in my year should be the ones going to the teachers as opposed to the teacher coming to them ... . (Esther Year 12)

One of the interviewees showed that as part of her determination to take responsibility for her learning, she was unprepared to accept what she saw as inadequate teaching in her previous school. She explained what she did when she was unhappy with the teaching in one of her subjects.

... so then I complained and then the Head of Department came and sat down at the back of the lesson and then after that he didn't put power points up on the board, he had it on his own little computer screen and he'd be reading off that and now he's sacked, thank God, so no-one else needs to go through that ... . (Zaara, Year 12)

This episode in Zaara's school experience captures an example of what is an extreme form of agency: a pupil's complaint seemingly leading to the removal of a teacher.

Although teachers sometimes complain that their pupils are motivated mainly by the pursuit of particular grades rather than by a desire to find out more about a subject, one of the pupil interviewees talked at some length about how she would, on occasions, like to try and extend her understanding to a new level. She said:

... I feel like, sometimes, just every so often, I want to, like, try and see how far I can do something, to, like, try and explore it a bit more and see if I can really understand something on a really deep level. (Joni, Year 12)

Finding a good work-life balance was something that another Year 12 talked about and showed a great deal of maturity and understanding of the commitment needed to do well in her A-level studies. She said:

I think that going into A-levels, the shock of the work hit me a bit recently but now I've started to realize that I can't go out as much as I used to during the holidays

and I realise that. (Elexis, Year 12)

The same pupil also showed that, not only did she reflect on her own learning, challenges and successes, but those of others too. Having explained to me how one of her friends had really benefitted from support at school from a particular teacher, she added:

... like, I was, I, I – I gave her, like, a massive hug on results day, I was so proud of her, what she did, like, ... .  
(Elexis, Year 12)

Experienced teachers are sometimes heard reflecting that, over the years, the approach they take in the teaching of their classes has become more constrained and more formulaic. Whilst pupil independence is a valued and sought-after quality, the power of the performative and accountability agendas can kindle a more directive approach in the classroom where the teacher focuses the majority of the teaching time onto preparation for high-stakes examinations. One of the Year 13s, however, showed that she had developed a clear vision for how time at school should be best spent. Having experienced different teaching styles and showing that she took her learning and progress very seriously, Jamie said:

Um, I think I prefer it when teachers, um, let you be a bit more independent, um, like, for example, 'cos I do English and sometimes some of the teachers, like, read stuff to you – it's like, well, I can read it myself and I don't really like – I feel like all our lessons are so limited, 'cos I only have 9 lessons per subject, like, per fortnight – um, our lessons are so limited I wish the teaching was more about, like, quality teaching instead of, um, going over things which are quite simple that we could do ourselves, so I think especially at the higher levels like A-levels that setting the easier work for you at home and then actually focusing on the harder stuff in class is, like, the most important thing you can do. (Jamie, Year 13)

The same pupil also reflected that, whilst independence is something she likes, there is also a limit to what a learner can do on his or her own. She said:

... you can't do everything by yourself, you can't read the text book by yourself, like, it's just not going to happen if you try and do everything independently. (Jamie, Year 13)

## **Conclusion**

Independence is a quality often said to be lacking in pupils today and it is not uncommon to hear from colleagues in higher education establishments that undergraduates are also becoming more dependent on being told what they need to do, almost as if, without personalised provision, spelling out to each individual what they must do for a 2:1, students do not know how best to proceed. An article (2011) from the Times Higher Education newspaper reported on a conference at Nottingham Trent University, where research by Dr. Peter Ovens (University of Cumbria) was discussed. According to this article, university students struggle to learn independently because when they were at school, the teachers focused primarily on meeting targets and complying with the requirements of OFSTED. The learners were '... led through their schooling by their teachers ...', leaving them unprepared for higher education, unable to take control of their learning and continuing to expect the spoon-feeding that they had previously received (Times Higher Education 2011: 1).

Perhaps it is worth reflecting that independence, like any other quality or skill, will not flourish in an environment lacking in the type of structures that would encourage and nurture it. If pupils are given a target to achieve, without any discussion or consultation and then taught what they need to do in order to achieve it, it is hardly surprising that they develop an instrumental attitude towards their education. In the drive to personalise learning, pupils can find that little encouragement is given to them in terms of thinking for themselves and trying to learn what lies outside and beyond their target grade.

What emerged, I think, from the interviews with the Kite Hill girls, was that, despite their having grown up through the school with high levels of performativity framing their experiences, there was, nonetheless, evidence



that they had their own ideas about their learning and were willing and prepared to take responsibility for it.

At the beginning of this thesis, I described how the introduction of personalised public services had, as one of its legitimating discourses, a central plank of increasing personal agency. The significant power of managerialism, has meant, however, that the individual – the person – may experience little of the potential empowerment and emancipation that personalisation heralds. In the case of the Kite Hill girls, it might be argued that in trying to assert some control over their learning, they are endeavouring to put some of the person back into what they have come to see as personalised learning which, to a large extent, is de-personalised – i.e. with mechanisms and processes that do not actually turn around them as individuals, but instead operate to target, to label and to require performance without necessarily encouraging it.

Whilst the Kite Hill study was a small enterprise, it could be the case that up and down the country, other pupils are also ready and willing to be more independent and to take more responsibility for their learning, than the current system allows. Policy makers should perhaps heed this possibility and, in the interests of preparing learners for a world of work that could well require individuals to be independent and not too risk adverse (see Lowden et al. (2011)), re-think this educational straight jacketing which informs so much of what we do in UK schools today.

## **Chapter 9 – Conclusion**

The main conclusion I drew from my case study at Kite Hill was that the implementation of personalised learning is problematic. Teachers spoke of the difficulties in preparing individualised learning resources and the accompanying challenges of distributing worksheets that appeared to have been simplified. Whilst embracing the importance of inclusion and diversity, the pedagogical technique of differentiation has become not so much the development of materials at a variety of levels, but an approach whereby there is work provided for the majority of the class together with help-sheets or modified exercises for the small numbers of learners who the teachers think might not be able to confidently undertake the main tasks. Pupils have become aware that some of the worksheets used in class and some of the questions posed by the teachers are set at an easier level. A few of those interviewed embraced this approach, reasoning that learners can 'work their way up' from the simpler tasks. However, many said that they would not like to be in receipt of easier work or more straightforward questions and those in the position are restricted in terms of what they might finally be able to achieve.

In trying to personalise learning, it is necessary first to try and understand the needs of the pupils. At Kite Hill, some of the teachers stated that the requirements of OFSTED to make visible and auditable their work, caused them to be concerned that they may encounter problems if they were to meet what they saw as their pupils' needs, but did so in a way that was difficult to measure. There was also a sense that teachers are under a lot of pressure to produce a set of good results and worry that other local schools might improve their outcomes, overtaking Kite Hill in terms of league table positions. Pupils' needs, in terms of what they might be required to do in their GCSE and A-Level examinations, therefore becomes prioritised over other needs.

At Kite Hill, the personalisation of learning takes place both in and outside of the classroom. Aware of the significance of the edumetric agenda, teachers mobilize significant amounts of intervention, such as arranging for examination preparation sessions after school, information about which is formally communicated to the girls and their parents with the expectation that those 'invited' do indeed attend. However, teachers also responded more directly to pupils' difficulties, offering to help them at lunchtime and during their non-contact periods. The Kite Hill pupils much appreciated this approach in that they saw it as a more genuine type of personalisation, arising naturally out of the good rapport they enjoyed with their teachers. With regard to the more managerial style of intervention, featuring official-looking letters and phone calls home, some of the pupils expressed concerns that they would perhaps put little effort into the sessions given that the focus might be on a subject they did not care much about or that the person leading them might not be their usual teacher. Several pupils also felt quite exposed when this type of help was implemented in that it appeared to single them out as less capable than their peers, who had not been asked to attend the revision or 'booster' sessions. So disempowered did one girl feel that she told her friends a white lie: that she had asked to attend the sessions rather than it having been the teachers saying she should go.

At Kite Hill, the implementation of personalised learning was hampered by the twin machineries of performativity and accountability; teachers were striving to personalise the work by making the topics and tasks accessible to all pupils whilst, at the same time, highly aware that their performance could be seen as lacking if an insufficient number of pupils met their externally set targets. In this sense, personalising the learning was removed from the control of the teacher with their knowledge about the pupils' needs being ignored or relegated to second place by powerful others such as visiting OFSTED inspectors or by the publication of large amounts of de-contextualised data over which they had no control. Although Kite Hill had experienced only successful inspections, there was a fear amongst the

interviewed teachers that they could easily be found wanting if pupils' examinations results were below expectation.

Although the Kite Hill teachers faced considerable challenges, they remained committed to the opportunities that personalised learning could bring to their pupils; one interviewee referred to 'bespoke learning' as a goal. For the pupils, there was evidence of a readiness to take responsibility for their learning despite the fact that many of the school systems and processes positioned them as passive recipients of others' decisions. Their efforts, in this respect, could perhaps be seen as a spirited attempt to re-personalise an education that although might purport to be personalised has, in reality, become de-personalised in that the person – her or himself – is largely prevented from exercising choice or being able to voice opinions about what, where, when or how they might want to study.

The contribution to knowledge made by this thesis is both of addition and extension. In exploring the effects of performativity and accountability on personalised learning, the Kite Hill case study adds to the already extensive literature on how the implementation of managerialist systems and processes can change the work and identities of teachers. In giving significant space to the voices of pupils, it also shows how pedagogy, learning and the self-perception of learners can change too.

Societal pressures, together with the impact of policy makers' decisions, are driving schools towards an ever-higher level of the type of personalisation whereby the individual pupil is targeted, dosed, measured, and given, or not given, extra support to meet pre-determined target grades. In the attempt to meet pupils' needs, various determinations about what those needs are come into play – made by parents, by teachers and by outside agencies such as OFSTED. Perhaps the one person, whose view on needs is less often considered, is the pupil her/himself. The question could then be asked as to where the 'person' is in this growing trend of personalisation.

Teachers, who work hard to get to know their pupils, will be keen to personalise what they do in ways such as their encouragement of those who lack confidence, their restraint of the over-enthusiastic, the reminders to the dis-organised and the help to those who do not yet understand. This type of knowledge about learners comes from the teachers' themselves. It can, however, become relegated to second place when what might be called 'official' knowledge is required to be absorbed and prioritised. By embracing teachers' professional knowledge, it should be possible to move away from the narrow, official lens of personalisation, towards an approach that puts the learner and her/his teacher at its heart. However, there does not currently appear to be any indication of a policy makers' retreat from their position of seeing personalised learning as another method by which to raise auditable attainment, and, as such, reduce the role of schools to one whereby their quality can be measured primarily on examination results.

Differentiation, as a pedagogical means to meeting the varied needs of learners, is not a wholly benign process and can contribute towards the construction of pupils' self-images as less capable and lacking in ability, which in turn can result in a loss of confidence, self-belief and a reduced willingness to engage in schoolwork. Teachers' well-meaning attempts to disguise the differences between their learners sit uncomfortably within the context of welcoming diversity. Pupils may reject the things that position them as less capable, for example the offer of additional help outside of normal teaching time. The protective stance taken by teachers may also have the effect of depriving pupils of the satisfaction of struggling and overcoming difficulties and of being sufficiently self-aware to know when to ask for help.

Current policy-makers' attempts to show that school standards are improving, both shapes the strategic framework of secondary education, and has the potential to become a constant, almost visceral presence that manifests itself in the daily life of the classroom, the self-images of the pupils and the work of the teachers. It is also worth considering that the narrow focus on public examination results may serve to create only the appearance

of school effectiveness in England, rather than be evidence of a truly world-class education system. Whilst a school with large numbers of pupils achieving high GCSE grades might be considered successful, questions should be asked about how those results were achieved. The shiny image of such success may become slightly tarnished if, for example, it became known that the children had been given a highly restricted curriculum over the course of much of their secondary schooling, so as to force them to concentrate primarily on the subjects, in which they were to be assessed. It might also be concerning to discover that large amounts of the pupils' time for sports and extra-curricular activities had been eroded so as to ensure that they spent many additional hours preparing for their assessments. Once the context of a particular school's outcomes is better understood, the appeal of lots of high GCSE grades might begin to look, at best, only skin deep, with the broader aims of education side-lined or lost altogether.

As continued pressure is put on schools through the introduction of even tighter performative measures, such as the current move towards tougher public examinations, it is likely that pupils will find they are required to participate in even more intervention activities. Currently there is already, in many schools, a vast apparatus of revision and catch-up sessions often held outside of the normal school day. For some pupils this formalising of help and support seemed to lack the authenticity of more traditional approaches by teachers that they saw as spontaneous and responsive to difficulties they themselves had asked for help with. 'Please come and see me if you are not sure about this topic' conveys a less institutionalised and more caring message than the letters going home, informing pupils that they are to attend intervention sessions because of a failure to meet externally set targets.

There then emerges a type of dissonance between what we say and what we do in schools, which results in mixed messages and practices: Pastoral sessions and assemblies encourage pupils to think for themselves, be themselves and pursue their own dreams and goals. In the actual day-to-day life of the school, they will be given subject grade targets without any

discussion, consultation or consideration and then dosed with the commensurate amount of skills and knowledge so as to help those targets to be reached. Their ambitions to do better than their targets, or their acceptance of not meeting their targets, only sometimes considered. In striving to personalise education we are in danger of leaving out the views and feelings of the very people for whom the individualised arrangements are being made. There would need to be a significant change of direction from policy makers if learning were to become personalised in the sense of a flexible provision, adjusted according to the aims and ambitions of the individual pupil. For a glimpse into this, as yet, unrealized scenario, please see Appendix 6. For another imagined scenario, please see Appendix 7 in which I paint a fictional picture of how ‘performatised personalisation’ might be enacted in an adult education setting.

Schools are likely to remain the sites of political struggles as successive administrations seek to impose their views as to what constitutes a good education. It is also likely, that given the current ease with which major curricular decisions can be made (such as the introduction of the English Baccalaureate) by politicians and the ever-increasing amounts of publicly available pupil attainment data, teachers will remain focused on trying to ensure the highest possible grades for their learners.

It is also likely, that, given the intense pressure on schools to evidence the highest possible level of pupil attainment, additional help and intervention will continue to be a significant part of their work. Arising from my case study at Kite Hill Girls’ School comes a recommendation that, wherever possible, pupils are given some say in how they engage with this aspect of school life. We know that once powerful others take control of the provision of institutionalized help, pupils can begin to feel disempowered, belittled and lacking confidence in their own abilities. Perhaps schools might consider equipping their learners with something like a personal help bank, full of credits that can be used to access different types of support. Once used up, more credits could be easily obtained so that no pupil is left without the mechanism to seek help. However, by gently putting the onus

back onto the pupil and doing so in a way that does not single anyone out, there will, I think be a greatly reduced incidence of pupils feeling unfairly or inappropriately targeted to receive extra help.

Another practical recommendation in terms of implementing additional help is that schools might try 'double-decker' support, whereby pupils who receive extra help are required to give someone else some help, using their own skills, knowledge and talents. This immediately reduces the stigma of being the one that gets help and reminds the receiver of extra support that they too have something that can be of assistance to someone else. It might also reduce the occurrence of pupils taking additional help 'for granted' and improve their understanding that, engaging in support activities, whether as the giver or the receiver, requires time, energy and effort.

The Kite Hill study raises some fundamental questions about the purposes and value of education in England today. Various initiatives such as personalised learning, together with many edumetric prescriptions, all promoted as strategies to improve schools, have had the effect of distorting the work of teachers, changing the focus of schools, engendering inequalities and causing unintended consequences, such as the erosion of pupil self-efficacy beliefs. Without a high-level debate about what it is that we, as a country, want for our young people, it is likely that schools will continue to be sites for a political tug of war. As described by Bernstein, who reflected that Durkheim had signalled a contradiction between faith and reason in the universities of the Middle Ages, what we are seeing now is much more serious than a disaccord. Although written some twenty years ago, his words could easily apply to the central educational challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today perhaps there is not so much a contradiction,  
but a crisis, and what is at stake is the very concept  
of education itself. (Bernstein, 1996: 88)

Education, as a powerful driver of improved lives for individuals, should be recognised as a valuable and precious social good. One of the key questions arising from my thesis, which requires further debate and further research



is to what extent education should be divided up and shaped around the perceived needs of individuals. If we judge that this 'tailoring' is desirable, then we need a better understanding as to how we apportion the knowledge, skills, support, and educational resources amongst all our young people so that personalised learning has, at its centre, the person.

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## **Appendix 1 - Information about Kite Hill Girls' School**

Kite Hill Girls' School is a large (1200 pupils), single-sex comprehensive school situated in an area of mainly comfortably off families with pockets of deprivation concentrated in two housing estates.

Opening in 1905 and then relocating to its present site in 1958, the school initially accommodated approximately 500 pupils. Considerable growth and expansion then followed as its popularity increased. Kite Hill is a calm and orderly place, where kindness and good manners are promoted. The older girls take on many roles of responsibility such as captaining sports teams, mentoring and assisting with music ensembles.

The school is ethnically diverse: White British is the largest group, followed by those of Pakistani and Indian Heritage. A wide range of starting points is represented with some girls arriving from Primary School having made exceptional progress, whilst others continue to struggle with basic levels of Mathematics and English for some time.

Staff turnover is low and there are several teachers whose employment at Kite Hill exceeds 20 years. Care and concerns for all learners is demonstrated by both teaching and support staff, which has made the inclusion of girls with significant special needs both possible and successful.

Kite Hill's very good outcomes in public examinations, generally puts it at the top of the local league tables. The school is popular, evidenced by the lack of difficulty in filling the 192 places in each year group and the waiting list of over 30 girls for the current Year 7.

## **Appendix 2 - Questions asked of the teachers:**

- 1) What does personalised learning mean to you?
- 2) What sort of differences are you taking into account when you try to personalise/differentiate?
- 3) What would personalised learning look like in an ideal world?
- 4) Do you wonder how pupils feel when they are given differentiated work?
- 5) What are your views on the various forms of intervention strategies, such as Easter Revision classes or one-to-one tuition?
- 6) Do you think that pupils who receive extra help do better?
- 7) Any other thoughts?

### **Appendix 3 - Questions asked of the pupils:**

- 1) Can you describe the best lesson you've had?
- 2) Is work set at the right level for you?
- 3) And for the other people in your class?
- 4) When people get different types of work or are asked different types of questions, how do they feel?
- 5) What do you think of the feedback you get?
- 6) Have you or any of your friends received any extra help at school?
- 7) How did you (they) feel about that?
- 8) Would you say that you (they) did better because of the help?
- 9) Any other thoughts?

#### **Appendix 4 – Characteristics of the teacher interviewees**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Number of Years Experience</b>	<b>Male/Female</b>	<b>Post of Responsibility?</b>
RE	12	F	Yes
English	36	F	Yes
English	6	F	No
Science	5	M	Yes
Art	32	M	Yes
Science	10	F	No
Business	28	M	Yes
MFL	3	F	No
Maths	3	F	No
Music	5	F	No



## **Appendix 5 – Information Sheet**

### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS**

*REC Reference Number: KCL/13/14 - 719*

**YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title of study: ‘Investigating personalised learning’**



#### **Invitation Paragraph**

You have been invited to take part in this research (which is part of Mrs Ceska's Doctorate) as you have had considerable experience of education at secondary level. Please take time to read this sheet and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if anything is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This study aims to find out more about pupils' and teachers' experience of personalised learning, i.e. when teachers set different work for some pupils or where some pupils receive extra help.

#### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You showed interest in this study after having seen the posters in school. All participants need to be over 16; the aim is to have a randomised selection of between 20 and 30 pupils and 10 to 20 teachers take part.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No. If you decide not to take part, you will not be penalised in any way.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep. You will then be invited to an interview where you will be asked some questions about personalised learning and/or take part in a group discussion. All sessions will be recorded and deleted after they have been transcribed. You can stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study right up to the point at which the report is being written up (January 2015).

#### **What are the possible risks of taking part?**

There should be no risks in taking part. The research is not linked in any way to you as an individual. The questions you will be asked are very straightforward and should not be upsetting or distressing.

#### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There are no direct benefits but by taking part in this research you will play a part in helping to improve teaching and learning at your school and possibly in other schools.

**Will my taking part be kept confidential?**

Yes. What you say in the interview is regarded as strictly confidential and will be held securely until the research is finished. All data will be anonymised. No 'real' names will be used and it will not be possible to identify you in the final report. No external agencies will be used to transcribe the interviews. The UK Data Protection Act 1998 will apply to all information gathered which will be held in password protected files. Any paperwork will be stored in locked filing cabinets. No data will be accessed by anyone other than me. If you ask me to withdraw your data at any time before January 2015, I will remove all traces of it from the records.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The final report will be made available to the participants and held in the King's College library.

**Who should I contact for further information?**

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details:

[louise.ceska@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:louise.ceska@kcl.ac.uk)

01628 502640 (School telephone number)

**What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?**

If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact King's College London using the details below for further advice and information:

Professor Sharon Gewirtz – [sharon.gewirtz@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:sharon.gewirtz@kcl.ac.uk) 020 7848 3138

Professor Alan Cribb – [alan.cribb@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:alan.cribb@kcl.ac.uk) 020 7848 3151

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.**

## **Appendix 6 – Consent Form**

### **CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH STUDIES**

**Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.**



**Title of Study: 'Investigating personalised learning'**

**King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: KCL/13/14 - 719**

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

**I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element I may be deemed ineligible for the study.**

- 1. \*I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated [10.05.14] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily.**
- 2. \*I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the end of January 2015.**
- 3. \*I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998.**
- 4. \*I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the College for monitoring and audit purposes.**

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5. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.
6. I agree to be contacted in the future by King's College London researchers who would like to invite me to participate in follow up studies to this project, or in future studies of a similar nature.
7. I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to receive a copy of it.
8. I consent to my interview being audio recorded.
9. I understand that I must not take part if I fall under the exclusion criteria as detailed in the information sheet and explained to me by the researcher.
10. I have informed the researcher of any other research in which I am currently involved or have been involved in during the past 12 months
11. I agree to maintain the confidentiality of focus group discussions

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix 7 - A New Chapter in Personalised Learning – imagining how things could be ...**

Max is 14 and in Year 9 at his local school. Like thousands of other 14 year olds in the UK, he is choosing his GCSE options for Year 10. He and his parents have decided that, although he will be studying a broad range of subjects, he will not be taking public examinations in Year 11. These ‘paper qualifications’ are unnecessary for Max, say his parents, as he will be joining their successful local, co-operative software business; he is already a very confident programmer and has designed some award winning websites. Max is not alone in his situation: about 20 other pupils in his class will not be taking their GCSE exams in Year 11. Some parents say that they will be aiming for their children to take them in Year 12 when they are a bit more mature. Having acquired the necessary skills for independent learning, pupils at Max’s school make the most of the extensive resources available on-line, which helps ensure they will be ready for the public exams as and when they choose to take them.

Max, along with his classmates, enjoys a rich and exciting education. Having more choice in what they study enables his class to take part in interesting, collaborative experiences, such as building a life-sized working Tudor kitchen. His French is advanced enough (the result of his teacher arranging for him to spend two terms in a French school at the end of Year 8) for the possibility of Work Experience in Paris during the course of Year 11. As a keen swimmer, Max has been able to gain his Lifeguarding qualification and has ambitions to complete an advanced First Aid course.

Now that lifelong, personalised learning is a defining feature of the UK education system and the old ideas of pupils having to get certain qualifications by a certain age largely discredited, New Road, Max’s school, is very supportive of these individualised arrangements. The senior leaders are confident that, since the Government ceased to use cohort attainment data to judge the quality of schools, their flexible and supportive provision will be seen as part of the excellent opportunities characteristic of the high-quality education made available to all learners. After OFSTED was remodelled, so that inspections were undertaken by groups of local Headteachers, teachers, parents and members of the community, it has been possible to establish a more rounded picture of what the school is like. This important reform also removed the fear/blame element of inspections and ended the requirement for teachers to ‘make visible’ what is now understood to be part and parcel of their professionalism and vocation, such as caring for the children and helping them to overcome barriers to learning.

For Max, the future looks bright. He enjoys learning at school; his intrinsic motivation, resilience and emotional wellbeing are all high. He is glad that what his parents went through – endless checks, tests, targets, after-school

booster sessions plus a lot of stress and anxiety – have now been consigned to the history books. Max knows that studying and working are mutually complementary activities that he will be engaged in for most of his life. With ready access to MOOCS and other on-line accredited courses, he can build a set of qualifications that will give him further opportunities as and when he needs them.

## **Appendix 8 - Experiencing 'performatised personalisation' in adult education – as imagined by L. Ceska**

30 year old John Jones – JJ to his friends – had long been interested in learning how to ballroom dance. He was, therefore, overjoyed to read in the local newspaper that his local college was offering a 6-week ballroom dancing course, taught in the evenings and free of charge.

JJ felt a surge of excitement as he stood at the reception desk of the college and enquired about the classes. 'We've received Government funding', said the receptionist, 'so we are able to offer the course for free'. JJ completed all the necessary paperwork and returned home, his head full of thoughts about how he would soon be acquiring some fabulous new dancing skills.

One week later, wearing a new shirt and trousers specially purchased for the occasion, JJ climbed the college stairs and headed for the Dance Studio. Inside, he could see people already trying out some elegant moves guided by the teacher who was wearing a special sort of ballroom dancing skirt that swirled around her as she demonstrated various steps. JJ could not wait to join them. Another teacher, wearing football kit and holding a clipboard, met him at the top of the stairs and asked him his name. 'Ah', she said, 'Mr Jones. If you would like to report to the smaller room at the back of the Dance Studio, you can say hello to the other learners who are going to be working towards the White Level Award.

'White Level?' said JJ, 'What does that mean?'

'Well', said the teacher, 'White Level is the first of the five Ballroom Dancing levels – White, Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum.' Based on your GCSEs, White Level is what we have selected as the most appropriate pathway for you. We offer a personalised approach to learning here and all students are given an individualised target.' The teacher smiled, nodded vigorously and gave JJ a friendly pat on the arm.

JJ felt bitterly disappointed. He had been so looking forward to doing well at ballroom dancing that being given such a low target was a crushing blow. He was painfully aware that he had not done well in his GCSEs, but had hoped to make a fresh start in this new venture.

'Could I be given a higher target?' asked JJ and the teacher gave him a sympathetic, if rather patronising, look and a long-winded answer about how Straightways College always encourage their students to aim high and that it was definitely, oh yes, definitely possible to exceed one's targets. This was not really what JJ meant, but he felt rather overawed by the situation and did not want to be seen either as someone who didn't understand what was said to him or someone who was always asking questions. The teacher continued to talk to JJ and explained that she would be the person teaching him and that the lesson would be starting in a few minutes. Realising that he

was looking at the sports kit she was wearing, she said that she normally taught football, but that the college had asked her to teach a bit of ballroom dancing to the White Levels.

JJ looked back into the Dance Studio at the other teacher in the swirly skirt and realized that the students in her group must be the ones targeted at the higher levels. He felt a pang of envy and his dream of becoming an accomplished ballroom dancer began to fade ... .